

Defragmenting Identity in the Life Narratives
of
Iraqi North American Women

by
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This dissertation examines contemporary Iraqi North American women's life narratives within the frame of postcolonial autobiography theory. Through narrating their experiences of oppression, war, and displacement these women reveal the fragmentation of identity that occurs under such unsettling situations. However, I argue that in the course of narrating their stories and in spite of the fragmentation they suffer, these women are able to establish selves that distinguish and recover from fragmentation and loss through a process I term defragmentation. They are able to defragment their identities by reconstructing unique selves through the act of life narration, through relational remembering, and finally by resisting patriarchal and Western influences on how they perceive themselves and their experiences. Thus they are able to defragment their sense of disjointedness and reaffirm their sense of Iraqiness, even in the diaspora.

This study explores the major causes of fragmentation in the work, which are divided into trauma and displacement. Unlike the studies and statistics that political approaches and media coverage have provided, these works shed light on the disruptions caused by war, oppression, separation from loved ones, and exile in the daily lives of these narrators or the lives of their friends and relatives. Therefore, in addition to the new identity that these women create in order to cope with their new lives in the West, they also construct a hybrid identity that is capable of recollecting and narrating these traumatic experiences. Within the space of hybridity, Iraqi North American women have to deal with vast differences between Western and Middle Eastern cultures; the transformation entails not just a change of place but an acceptance or understanding of a new culture, a new religion, and a new identity. The struggle of settlement, or re-settlement, becomes that of establishing an identity that does reflect the stereotypical images of Middle

Eastern women in Western perceptions and a struggle to maintain selves that can contain both the past life and the present in what can be considered a third space.

Although the main topic of this dissertation is defragmentation in the life narrations of Iraqi North American women, this study also covers the cultural and political history of Arabs in general, and of Iraqis specifically. There are also references to the migrations of Arabs to North America and a brief background of the roots of Arab North American literature. These topics will be discussed in order to provide an understanding of the histories from which these women, or their families, have migrated and their positions within Western culture and scholarship. In addition, this approach provides an insight into the complexities of these women's identities that reflect multi-layered affiliations, interests, and cultures.

The works chosen for this study include written and oral life narratives by Iraqi North American women who write from Canada and the United States. These works are Zaineb Salbi's *Between Two Worlds: Escape From Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam* (2005), Dunya Mikhail's *A Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009) and a National Film Board documentary titled *Baghdad Twist* (2007), by Jewish Iraqi Canadian Joe Balass. In the documentary, Joe Balass interviews his mother, Valentine Balass, as she recounts growing up in Iraq and later experiencing exile from her homeland. The final work I address is *The Orange Trees of Baghdad: In Search of My Lost Family* (2007) by Leilah Nadir, a Canadian born Iraqi writer. Through her memoir Nadir tries to reconnect with her father's family in Iraq while uncovering their traumatic experiences of the Gulf War.

The narrators in my research belong to different social classes, age groups, and practice different religions, but they all identify themselves as Iraqi women. These women, through their interpretations of living life between two (or more) cultures, offer important perspectives not

only on their own ethnic society, but also on the role of ethnic women in North American society in general. There has been a massive increase in the migration of Iraqi women to North America in the last thirty years; their perspectives on political, social, and religious changes are an important part of understanding the experiences of this ethnic group. Through their life narratives, these women are able to display their unique selves by portraying their ability to contest the boundaries and limitations of borders and societies that try to eliminate one identity or the other.

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Dedication

For Iraqi women at home and in the diaspora.

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Introduction

[L]iterary criticism has had its effects, and now, at the end of the century, the autobiographical canon has been greatly extended, and the autobiographical *theory* derived from it is more likely to be fashioned out of women's writing than that of men.

Carolyn Steedman, "Enforced Narratives" (25)

Women were and are the first storytellers. It is through stories related to us by our mothers and grandmothers that we gain our first inkling of the elements of fiction, as well as our first notions of love, justice, and sacrifice.

Bouthaina Shaaban, *Voices Revealed* (19)

My dissertation examines contemporary Iraqi North American women's life narratives, focusing especially on their representations of war, oppression, and displacement. While their narratives display fragmentation due to trauma and displacement, at the same time, it is my belief that these women establish selves that recognize and actively recover from fragmentation through a process I term defragmentation. The collection and recollection of memories, for these women, becomes a recollection of the self and an establishment of an identity in which their native selves and their newly constructed selves work together to overcome the fragmentation caused by trauma and displacement. They achieve defragmentation of identity first and foremost through the act of narration itself, second through relationality, and finally by resisting to adhere to the perceptions that patriarchal and Western influences have limited them to.

I first used the term defragmentation in my M.A. thesis, *"This rhythm does not please me": Women Protest War in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry*, in which I discussed the representations of Iraqi women's protests of war in Dunya Mikhail's collection of poetry *The War Works Hard* (2005). In her work, I found that although the women protagonists are unable to protest the war

physically, they do so mentally by defragmenting its affects on their lives. They refuse to comprehend the loss that it has caused, thus denying its power over their daily lives. However, in this study the process of defragmentation is not only to protest war, but to also re-establish identities that reflect confident women that survive the fragmentation that is caused by experiences of oppression, war, and displacement.

For Iraqi North American women, the redefinition of the self can only be obtained through the stability that they find in their host nations, because war, oppression, and even the act of migration itself renders these women's identities in a state of constant alteration. Thus, it is only after these women reach a state of stability in the host country, in this case either Canada or the U.S., that they are able to face their pasts and relate their experiences. Consequently, the process of narration allows these women to re-search themselves and their positions within their new spaces and cultures as well as address the experiences that they have endured in the past. Grad and Rojo add to this discussion on migrant identities by stating that,

an immigrant's identity includes the discourses on immigration that affect how he or she perceives him/herself or is perceived by others. Thus identity comprises lots of narratives that the person constructs for him or herself and for others. In these narratives, which may vary across occasions, people do an interpretation of themselves, attempting to give meaning to their lives and construct a socially recognizable self. In short, autobiographical narratives do not only represent or express the self, but rather constitute it. (10-11)

Through the act of narration, Iraqi North American women construct selves that allow them to confront past fears, while at the same time, these selves enable them to adapt to new positions in the diaspora.

The issue of immigration to the West brings about deeper concerns of belonging in the New World; the struggle of settlement becomes that of establishing an identity that does not connect to the stereotypical images of the Middle Eastern woman and a struggle to maintain a self that can contain both the past life and the present in what is considered a liminal space of identity. Al-Ali explains that the burdens of exile are not solely physical and material:

Aside from the physical and material realities and hardships related to living in a strange place away from home, exile also refers to a state of mind and being.

Received notions and ideas as well as set practices and traditions are unsettled when people are forced to leave the known and familiar behind. While many of those exiled face a ‘crisis of meaning,’ others fervently and desperately hold on to the past and everything they knew and did before. (*Iraqi Women* 17)

Thus Iraqi North American women are forced to establish what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call a “fluidity of identities” (37). Fluidity of identity becomes essential for Iraqi North American women caught in the transition between East and West. Through this fluidity of identity they are able to retrieve their native identities from their past lives and defragment the traumatic effects of war, occupation, and, at times, social oppression that have led them to leave their homes and confront the loss by finding themselves once again in a new land and society. Wail Hassan adds to this discussion of negotiation the fact that “it is not enough for the marginalized autobiographer to undermine socially constructed identity; he/she must be able to engage the dominant discourse dialogically in order for his/her intervention to negotiate a viable identity effectively” (“Arab-American Autobiography” 9). In the case of Iraqi North American women, they make a conscious choice of using the English language as the main medium for communicating their experiences. In addition, through their narratives, they try to establish

common grounds between themselves and their Western readers; for instance they explain and compare cultural differences to their readers to help them understand the experiences that these narrators underwent. Through their narratives, these women try to establish identities that will enable them to be accepted in their new environment, while at the same time keep them connected to their motherland and native culture.

The works by and on these women are important for a number of reasons; some of the most prominent are: they provide an insight into the lives of Iraqi women, not only during times of political unrest, but also in times of peace and stability; they also challenge the stereotypical Western image of the weak, oppressed, and dominated women in Arab society. Their life narratives portray an ability to contest the boundaries and limitations of borders and societies that try to eliminate the uniqueness of each of their identities. “The inscription of memory in postcolonial Arab, [which includes Iraqi,] women’s writing,” claims Mehta, “provides the basis to engage in meaningful discussions of gender, race, class, nationhood, sexuality, and culture” (3) in these societies. Their stories need to be read and realized as a part of the contemporary literary canon.

However, there seems to be a general lack of attention by North American critics and scholars to the incidents of the Middle East and its people and to the mass migrations in that area, especially those of Palestinian, Iraqi, and more recently Syrian migrations.¹ In her essay “Diaspora and Cultural Memory” (2005), Anh Hua writes that memory is important because “it is one way to pass on traditions, rituals, and group history. Memory analysis can also unfold the working processes of various traumas including transatlantic slavery, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the two World Wars, and 9/11” (199-200). Hua presents an interesting discussion on memory; however, although she relates some of the most tragic incidents in human history, at the

same time, she fails to note any of the traumatic incidents that took place in the Middle East during the 20th century. Western media and even Western scholars may approach the issues taking place in these countries; however, they do so from a political point of view without understanding the personal experiences of the people living through these traumatic incidents. This lack of attention minimizes the significance of the experiences and the movements of these peoples out of their homes and outside of their native countries. The Palestinian issue, to some extent, has been addressed by numerous poets, novelists, and more importantly by scholars in diverse fields like Edward Said, Michael W. Suleiman, and Rabab Abdulhadi. Their works, from political, critical, and literary points of view have opened up and developed the discussion on the Palestinian diaspora and the impact of occupation on the Palestinian people. While the Palestinian situation is still a very active topic for discussion, at the same time it is not the only topic in the Middle East that needs critical attention. The area and its people have been undergoing constant political and cultural changes for the past fifty years. In 1993 Seteney Shami commented,

[t]he Arab world has witnessed all . . . types of population displacement and also shows particularities specific to the region. Contemporary state efforts at modernization through infrastructural development, agricultural land reform, land reclamation and so on have frequently entailed resettlement projects. Wars, famines, droughts and earthquakes have also played a role in changing demographic configurations. Yet the literature on the topic is uneven with surprisingly little analytical discussion. Understandably, attention is focused on such prominent cases as the complex Sudanese situation, the Nubian experience, the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian diaspora. While much that is valuable

and significant has been written about these cases, they have generally been treated as isolates. Little attempt has been made to systematize the findings within a theory of population displacement or a regional comparative framework. (5)

Currently, issues like the Gulf Wars and the Arab Spring (and its aftermath) are all vital to understanding the effects of these changes on the Middle East, specifically, and on the world in general.

Furthermore, the approach to such topics cannot be limited within a political or even an anthropological scope because a more comprehensive understanding of these changes should be established through the narratives of individuals who live through these events and experience these developments first-hand. Examples of these narratives can be found within the expanding North American literary canon that is currently in a state of constant transformation. The inclusion and exclusion of writers and their literatures is no longer bound by the regulations that were set even half a century ago. Maurizio Ascari (2011) concurs:

Today's critical and theoretical discourses on literature not only relate texts to the wider domain of culture, but also investigate new cartographies. In the second half of the 20th century, postcolonial criticism/theory has striven to overcome the binarism *us/them* that had characterized the colonial order, in an attempt to advocate cultural hybridization, to give voice to the memories of subalterns, and to shed light on the conflicts that were provoked both by colonial expansion and by the subsequent migratory fluxes. . . . As a result of these and other concomitant factors, the concept of literary canon—as a list of foundational texts on which national literature and identity rest—is no longer a viable tool to study contemporary culture whose dimension can rather be described as *planetary*. (7-8)

This study aims to add to the newly considered list of “planetary” texts through the critical exploration of Iraqi North American women’s life writing. This study also aims to establish a tangible picture of the authors’ struggles through traumas and displacements, their reflections on their experiences as a part of the Iraqi community, and finally their persistence to demonstrate their unique and individual identities.

1. Iraqi Women’s Life Narratives in Western Scholarship

Arab women’s autobiographies deserve attention because they do not represent themselves in their autobiographical writings in ways that accord with the stereotype of the weak, oppressed woman that the West has drawn for its audience. On the contrary, these women have endured and survived the tragedies of war, diaspora, and displacement while still grasping to their passion for life and asserting their distinctiveness. These women, through their interpretations of living life between two (or more) cultures, offer important perspectives not only of their own ethnic society, but also on the role of ethnic women in North American society in general. Their perspectives on political, social and religious changes in their lives are an important part of understanding the experiences of this ethnic group.

Nawar Hassan Golley states that Arab North American women’s life writing has been “underresearched” and “the available critical readings do not match the number of autobiographical writings that Arab women are producing” (xxv). Nevertheless, Arab North American women’s autobiography has, in the last couple of decades, established a critical audience, but these writers are mainly Egyptian like Leila Ahmed (*A Border Passage* 1999), Lebanese like Athel Adnan (*In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* 2005), or Palestinian like Ibtisam Barakat (*Tasting the Sky* 2007). Unfortunately, Iraqi women’s autobiography has not

been seriously approached by North American critics,² other than in some reviews and limited studies.³ I have taken into consideration that the works of women of other Arab origins has been addressed more due to the fact that they began to publish translated works and works written in English before Iraqi women. Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian Arabs began to migrate to North America much earlier than Iraqis.⁴

Although Iraqis have been migrating in noticeable numbers to North America since the mid 20th century, their migrations increased greatly after the first Gulf War. Nadjé Al-Ali explains: “during the period of economic sanctions (1990-2003), simple categories of voluntary versus forced migration did become blurred as hundreds of thousands of Iraqis left in the context of severe economic crisis and ongoing political repression” (*Iraqi Women* 14). Iraqi migration increased massively after the second Gulf War in 2003 with the rise of instability and violence. Additionally, it must be taken into account that interest in Arab North American literature in general began to be addressed after the 1991 Gulf war in Iraq and later, on a wider scope, after the incidents of 9/11. As Ascari claims, the “terrorist attacks of 9/11 are at the root of a new form of cultural industry, which has developed in various directions. . . . [T]hese events have been conducive to a renewed interest in the contemporary East and its conflicts” (23). While it is not necessarily the events that led to the conception of such literary trends, however, they have led to the increase in such works.

Notable scholars on Iraqi women’s lives and struggles are Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, a social anthropologist of Iraqi descent, and Nicola Pratt. Their works have focused on the situation of Iraqi women and issues of gender, transnationalism, and diaspora in time of war and occupation within the context of gender theory. One of Al-Ali’s works is *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (2007), while other works she edited with Pratt include: *Women and War in*

the Middle East (2009) and *What Kind of Liberation: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009).

Her latest project is a book that Al-Ali edited with Deborah Al-Najjar titled *We Are Iraqis:*

Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War (2013). These works are important sources of critical study on the situation of Iraqi women from all ethnicities and religions within Iraq and even on those in exile around the world. In her book, *Iraqi Women*, Al-Ali states that her study “puts the life stories and experiences of Iraqi women at the centre and attempts to construct an alternative history or histories” (1). She suggests that the Iraqi women she includes in her work and interviews

are not mere passive victims of circumstance: they have been resourcefully, creatively, and actively trying to adapt to rapidly changing situations; they have resisted political oppression; and they have been trying to keep together and sustain their families and society despite the deterioration of infrastructures, lack of security and harsh everyday living conditions. (1)

Al-Ali’s book encompasses stories about the lives of Iraqi women over about a half a century and she includes women from all ages, who live in Iraq, England, and North America. Her work is important in understanding Iraqi women’s perspectives throughout revolutions, wars, and occupation; nevertheless the stories she presents about these women are based on interviews through which she explores fragments of these women’s experiences. For instance, her focus, as she contends, is on the period between two “historical junctures,” British colonial rule in the beginning of the 20th century and American and British occupation in the beginning of the 21st century. She illustrates, “on one hand, women’s great achievements, the positive developments with respect to their status and the increase in their social, political and legal rights, and, on the other, the continual obstacles, repression and immeasurable human suffering in their lives” (13).

. Al-Ali's book *Iraqi Women*, for instance, presents Iraqi women's stories through the writer's own attempt at life writing. Through a gender-based approach, she presents the testimonies of Iraqi women, but she also includes her own "anecdotes, experiences, and observations" (2). She becomes the medium for these stories as she introduces, discusses, and supports these excerpts from Iraqi women's lives by providing historical, cultural and political analyses of these stories. Al-Ali's latest project is a book that she edited with Deborah Al-Najjar titled *We Are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War* (2013); The work is a collection of literary essays and testimonies, however the work discusses the literary and artistic forms of resistance to the U.S. occupation and the escalating violence in the past ten years. The work that Al-Ali, Pratt, and Al-Najjar have accomplished is significant because it introduces to Western audiences in Europe and North America Iraqi women's struggles through the political and social changes in their country.

Brinda Mehta's book *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing* (2007) provides a literary analysis of an Iraqi woman's memoirs. She discusses *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile* (2003) and "Twenty-Eight Days in Baghdad" (2003) by Iraqi born-writer and artist Nuha Al-Radi. Mehta focuses on the importance of the Iraqi female perspective of war. Iraqi women like Al-Radi present "the woman-version of the invasion" claims Mehta, which becomes "an enabling act of self-affirmation by permitting the author/narrator to voice previously unarticulated truths that have been silenced by the combined forces of patriarchy, imperialism, and racism" (210). Mehta acknowledges the importance of Iraqi women's perspectives and personal voices on the Gulf Wars through her study of Al-Radi's memoirs, which reveal the day-to-day challenges of living through such difficult circumstances.

While Al-Radi's work is written in English, at the same time it is written in Iraq and does not address the diasporic aspects found in the memoirs of Iraqi North American women.

Gillian Whitlock in her book *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2010) addresses two Iraqi autobiographies: the first is the weblog by Salam Pax⁵ titled, *Where is Raed?* (2003), and the second is an autobiography titled *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* (2003) by Jean Sasson.⁶

The latter relates the experiences of Mayda Al-Askari, a female "Iraqi journalist and member of the Iraqi elite" (89), who was imprisoned and tortured in Iraqi Intelligence prisons in pre-war Iraq. Whitlock writes that autobiography "circulates as a 'soft weapon'. It can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard" (3). Her book is a response to the claim that such works raise "questions about relations between readers and narrators, and how autobiographical narrative is marketed, consumed, and taken up into debates about politics of identity in times of crisis" (10). While Whitlock tries to move past the materialist manipulations of such Iraqi works, at the same time, her focus ignores the Iraqi female voice. Her focus is mainly on Salam Pax. Even though Salam Pax may differ from other young, Iraqi males through his Westernized points of view, his view is still masculine.

Furthermore, Whitlock's discussion of *Mayada* is also problematic because the actual voice of Mayada al-Askari is never heard, except as mediated through the voice of Jean Sasson (an American writer); therefore, "in Mayada the devices of romantic nonfiction ostensibly celebrate the Western intervention in Iraq" (Whitlock 89). As readers we witness Mayada's experiences, but we do so from a second hand, American perspective that aims to justify the Gulf War.

Although Suman Gupta's *Imagining Iraq: Literature in English and the Iraq Invasion* (2011) is not concerned with life writing, his work is one of the most recent works of literary criticism that discusses the Gulf Wars. Gupta addresses the impact of the second Gulf War on

different forms of contemporary English literature written between 2003 and 2005. He argues that, “the idea of the imponderable reality of [the American invasion of Iraq] fed into literature’s relation to the world, from whatever position. The reality of it was unavoidably both talked about in literary texts and impinged upon the forms of literary texts” (28). His work is mostly concerned with the interference of the reality of the war in Iraq on texts of North American and British writers. Gupta does include discussions on poetry by Iraqi American writers such as Dunya Mikhail and Sinan Antoon, and a chapter on blogs by Iraqis, such as *Where is Raed?* by Salam Pax and *The Baghdad Blog* by Riverbend. While these works are important sources of Iraqi perspectives on the war, at the same time the former are fictional and the latter are written in Iraq. Gupta, like Mehta and Whitlock, does not include any form of life writing by Iraqis (men or women) living in the diaspora.

The research and contributions of the above critics and scholars are highly important because their works are invitations to further understand and analyze the writings that reflect Iraqi people’s experiences of war and displacement. In my own work, I hope to expand on the research that these scholars have produced by shedding light on the life narratives of Iraqi North American women, who specifically write in Canada and the United States. Although, like the texts chosen by Mehta and Al-Ali, these narratives reflect women’s experiences of war, displacement, and oppression in their native country, at the same time they portray the strength and determination that these women have to survive, re-establish themselves in host countries, and, more importantly, narrate these experiences to the world. This study is not limited to introducing recorded testimonies of Iraqi North American women nor is it concerned with approaching their works from a more anthropological perspective; instead it aims to analyze the

rhetoric and the language of Iraqi North American women's texts and find how these testimonies help shape the identities of these women in the diaspora.

2. Texts

The primary works I have chosen for my research include life writing by Iraqi women who have written or spoken about their experiences of war, diaspora and (or) their journeys from Iraq to North America. The works are diverse in the sense that they present different eras of Iraqi history, their narrators come from different cultural backgrounds and practice different religions, and finally they are presented through different literary genres. My primary works are Zaineb Salbi's *Between Two Worlds: Escape From Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam* (2005), Dunya Mikhail's *A Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009) and the documentary, *Baghdad Twist* (2007) directed by Jewish Iraqi Canadian Joe Balass. The final primary work I include in this study is by Iraqi Canadian writer Leilah Nadir. Nadir, unlike the other narrators, has never been to Iraq, nor has she experienced war or exile first hand. In her memoir, *The Orange Trees of Baghdad* (2007), the author tries to retrace her family's experiences of war and diaspora from a distance.

The period that these texts cover spans from the mid 20th century to the early 21st century. Beginning with Valentine Balass's depiction of the Jewish Iraqi exodus and ending with Nadir's portrayal of the second Gulf War; all four narratives examine vital points in Iraqi history. Through their own stories and the stories of their loved ones, these women retell the historical consequences that changed the fate of a nation. From their points of view as children, young women, or even as outsiders, they portray what it means to be Iraqi women caught in the cataclysmic events of revolutions, wars, and exile.

3. Methodology

This study on Iraqi North American women's life narratives is framed in autobiography theory and postcolonial theory. Before investigating the main topics of this research, two issues need to be considered in dealing with postcolonial, ethnic autobiography. The first issue has to do with the fact that autobiography or life writing was and is, to some extent, considered a Western form of literature. Therefore, how would Iraqi women's perspectives be approached or even critically assessed by Western critics and scholars? A second issue pertains to the fact that these writers are writing as a minority in more than one aspect: they are women and they are Arab in origin. As members of a minority, their authority and agency are the first to be questioned, especially when authority is part of how these women defragment and reconstruct their identities through writing or relating their experiences.

Concerning the first issue, Dwight F. Reynolds (2001) states that autobiography, "in the mid-twentieth century, . . . was dramatically reconstructed in western literary criticism as a cultural product unique to modern western civilization" (17). Reynolds basis his assertion on Georges Gusdorf's (1956) article in which the latter claims:

It would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby be annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. . . . The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal. It asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world. (8)

However, Reynolds does not agree with Gusdorf's point of view; he insists that the structural and rhetorical characteristics of the western chronological, narrative-based autobiography have become the gauge by which the scholars seek to measure the level of "self-consciousness" and "individual identity" present in other historical periods and other cultures, bypassing the changing literary conventions that mediate these expressions of the self. The most inevitable result is that other, particularly nonwestern, forms of autobiography are discounted as immature and underdeveloped, as pale shadows of the "real" or "true" autobiography known only in the modern West, and therefore as literary productions clearly not born of the same sense of individual identity. (19)

Like Reynolds, I believe that the "Western-centered" concept of autobiography excludes any life writing that does not adhere to its standards. Unlike western autobiographers, ethnic North American, in this case Iraqi North American, autobiographers are considered unlikely to present a developed testimony of their experiences. As the subaltern, these writers come from a history of colonization (by the Ottomans and the British), from occupation (by the Americans and the British), and form a minority group in their North American homes. Their histories have placed them in the position of the oppressed. Gayatri Spivak (1998) claims, "[t]estimony is the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other" (8). Nevertheless, Spivak continues her argument by claiming that "[s]uch a reversal and displacement, in postcoloniality, of the autobiographer's privilege, is to be strictly distinguished from the generic or structural impossibility of autobiography being narrativized through the agency of colonialism" (11). Thus, it is within the position of the "subaltern witness" that these women find they have agency;

through unveiling only what they have experienced and endured outside the North American borders, they come to have agency as witnesses to postcolonial oppression in their homelands.

In addition, Arab⁷ Iraqi women come from a culture that has a long claim to the genre of autobiography. Autobiography in the Arab tradition began as early as the pre-Islamic period.

Reynolds relates that the Arabs in that era

practiced a type of oral biography in the form of short narratives called *akhbār* (sing. *khavar*). When reciting his genealogy, a tribesman would identify remarks and accounts of memorable incidents associated with certain figures in the lineage . . . the informational *khavar* and the transmitted text (whether a list of names or a poem), affirmed each other's authority and authenticity. (Reynolds 36)

The history and tradition of autobiography in the Arab world challenges the concept that the genre is limited to Western culture and tradition. Furthermore, even Arab North American writers began to explore the genre as early as 1914, with the publication of works like *A Far Journey* by Lebanese-born pastor Abraham Rihbany. As the number of Arab immigrants to North America began to increase, so did the number of autobiographical works by this group of people, who tried to relate through their writings the experience of the journey to North America and the challenges of settlement in their new homes.

The second issue that is of concern in this study is the fact that all four narrators chosen for this study are women. Women, according to a study by Sue Campbell (2003),⁸ have been classified as limited in their portrayal of memories. She relates that, “when a woman acts as a rememberer, she is often in a vulnerable position of narrating a view about the significance of the past to the present that is not shared by dominant members of her culture” (Campbell 48). This vulnerability is linked to women's inability to have “clear and detailed” thoughts like men,

whose “impressions of experience,” on the other hand, “are so detailed and bold,” and therefore much more comprehensive and acceptable (103). Men are considered, by some critics and scholars, to have the ability to write autobiography because they have “a reverence for the past and for the truth” (103), while women do not, and therefore cannot retell their own stories. More importantly, because memory has been so closely bound with identity, women’s failure to remember the past and retell it correctly leads to the formation of their weak identities because they cannot connect between their past and present selves.

Many changes have taken place in the genre of autobiography since the publication of Gusdorf’s article in 1956, such as the increasing number of Western women authors⁹ and scholars in the field, like Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Tess Coslett, etc.; however, Middle Eastern women autobiographers are still categorized as a subaltern minority in comparison to their Western female contemporaries. Their authority is further questioned because of the assumed subaltern positions that these women hold in their own homelands; they are almost always depicted as marginalized, oppressed, and uneducated. As addressed earlier, Arab North American women writers find themselves stereotyped as weak, dominated in their patriarchal societies; as Nawar Al-Hassan Golley claims, the “Western stereotype of the Arab woman remains that of an invisible and silent woman shrouded in mystery” (xxvi). Even critics who have tried to approach Arab women’s writing as “bridges and channels of communication between east and west seem—on reflection—more like walls or dams that reinforce exclusivity in all parties” (Gemie 94). The image of Arab women in the West always seems to pre-determine the identity of individual Arab women, without acknowledgement of their uniqueness or diversity of character, history, experience, place, time, and education. These stereotypes overlook the political and social transformations that have taken place in the Arab region; and in

turn, they have led to changes in the role of Arab women throughout the Arab countries. Golley relates:

Over the past couple of decades, as the various [Arab] countries have sought to find an identity in the postmodern, postcolonial world of the twenty-first century, attitudes regarding women have changed at a phenomenal rate Arab women of all classes and denominations and from all Arab countries have been reaping the benefits of increased and improved access to education and employment opportunities [I]f we examine the autobiographical writings of Arab women themselves, we find that they have been courageous and creative in both the lives they have lived and the ways in which they have written about them. They have played a full part in the political struggles and developed many modes of writing the self. In this sense, Arab women's autobiographical writings serve as more than a means by which to create images of the self through the writing act, but rather they have served as a way to find a voice—whether private or public—through which to express what cannot be expressed in any other form. (xxvi)

The act of writing for Arab women in their homelands and in exile is an outlet to portray their life experiences. In war, they confront their fears and they portray their struggles “to maintain households and keep their families together in a context of limited basic services, lack of social safety nets, restricted income-generation activities and dismantling of social networks” (Al-Ali and Pratt *Women and War* 2); and in peace, they regenerate their traditions and identities through retelling their experiences. Historically, especially between the seventh and ninth centuries, “Arab women seemed to have an extraordinary amount of freedom to express their feelings [even] towards their lovers” (Shaaban 5). They wrote in a number of different genres, including

“prose, family letters, *maqāmāt* [trans. episodic stories], stories, proverbs, descriptions, dialogues, and Islamic interpretations (*tafsīr*)” (5). Their writings were “poignant and dignified and their reasoning logical, informed, and . . . [their literature] reflects a clear sense of culture” (5). However, the importance of Arab women’s writing is not limited to their ability to match the works of their male contemporaries, but to establish a space for themselves within that male culture that does not only rely on masculine concepts and ideals. Furthermore, Salwa Cherif states that

in addition to asserting their ethnicity in a hostile, image ruled environment, Arab American [and Arab Canadian] women must also voice their femaleness. Their experience of self is strongly gendered on account of the serious limitations for women that the journey to the past leads them to (dis)/(un)cover. The articulation of the self through the traditionally empowering return to the past, in their case undertaken to negotiate the Arab and the American [or Canadian] parts of the self, requires the use of a gendered memory guiding through the silences about the female past. (207-8)

The strength of Arab women’s writing is found in its refusal to reflect and echo the Arab male traditions of writing, such as the latter’s encouragement of warfare and sacrifice for the greater national well-being, as seen in Iraqi war literature.

Arab male writers and critics also limit the role that Arab women narrators and writers play, as the former “repeat and reinforce their judgments about Arab women’s writings, which they claim, fail to extend beyond the boundaries of home, children, marriage, and love and thus do not explore the social and political paradigms of their countries” (Shaaban 1). Both Arab and Western critics have neglected the fact that the real images of Arab society and traditions lie in

the portrayal of the home and family, rather than the battleground and the media. Instead of the images created currently in Western media of jihadists, insurgents, and religious radicals, there should exist an image of Arab culture that lies beyond the battlefield, recognizing issues such as love, marriage, and home that reveal the humanity and the normalcy of life in the Arab world.

3.1. Autobiography and Relationality

According to a number of sources (i.e. Shapiro, Waugh, and Campbell) the concept of relationality originates from the scholarship of feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow in her work *The Reproduction of Mothering*¹⁰ (1978). Through the analysis of mother-daughter relationships, Chodorow found that “women experience a sense of self-in-relation that is in contrast to men’s creation of a self that wishes to deny relation and connection” (viii). Furthermore, this concept of self-in-relation that women experience, according to Chodorow, explains how “growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others” (169). The concept was adopted and developed by scholars of autobiography like Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck who, in their introduction to *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, claimed that, “self-definition in relation to significant others is the most pervasive characteristic of female autobiography” (8). However, the theory was further developed to include other concepts such as intersubjectivity, which Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield argue, “implies that the narration of a life or a self can never be confined to a single isolated subjecthood. Others are an integral part of consciousness, events and the production of narrative” (*Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* 4). The concept of constructing a relational self becomes an integral part of establishing identity because the self can never be understood as a single entity without connections to others, significant or

insignificant. In the narratives chosen for this study, relational ties are crucial in helping the individual construct a self-identity by establishing a sense of history and belonging, while at the same time these ties do not limit the individual from establishing an independent self.

The life narrations of the Iraqi North American women that I have chosen to discuss in my research are heavily based on autobiographical relationality. Through relationality, these women maintain a collective identity, which is a feature of minority literature. Wail Hassan, reflecting on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari,¹¹ states that the “personal is always collective, and the concerns of the individual are shared by other members of the minority” (*Immigrant Narratives* 5). As they narrate their own stories, these women relate the stories of their families and friends both in Iraq and in North America. They also relate the historical events of their country and the experiences of their people in the homeland. For Iraqi North American women relational ties to society and culture lead to a sense of affirmation and completeness that allows these women to face their traumatic experiences. Through relationality they reveal images of their personal and public surroundings. The “[i]dentity-formation of diasporic communities involves the development and constant reconsideration of collective memory as well as the definition of the relation to the host country” (Neumeir 86). As Iraqi North American women connect and disconnect themselves to those around them, they are able to defragment their memories and re-establish their identities both within their native cultures and their new cultures in North America. “Writers [and narrators] understand from this process [of writing and narrating] that concepts of a self are constructed, not a priori,” writes Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy, “that the labels that we assume from our interpretations of our experiences can be altered, and in this process we can temper the sense of isolation from oneself and others and promote integration” (3). For these women, the act of narrating their traumatic experiences and

their journeys to the safety of the host nation, enables them to find a place among other Iraqis in the diaspora; thus a sense of connection to a country and a people is maintained, even in exile.

One of the major tensions in this study is the discussion of individuality and relationality in Iraqi North American women's life narratives. Although relational ties in Western culture, and, in turn, Western scholarship, are considered to limit the individual's sense of independence or even eliminate it, in Arab culture, however, the family "provides the primary sense of identity and belonging" (Abudi 28). The connection to family does not have to be viewed as a renunciation of individuality; instead the concept of belonging to a family, society, and nation indicates a sense of affirmation and completeness that allows these women to face their traumatic experiences. In such cultures agency and relationality are able exist together, and maybe even strengthen the individual's sense of self. In her introduction to *Intimate Selving in Arab Families* (1999), Suad Joseph writes:

Relational selfhood, when it has been theorized in psychology, has been often dysfunctionalized. Western psychology has tended to assume that autonomy and relationality are oppositional. The valorization of autonomy for maturity in Western culture has led many theorists to regard relationality as an obstacle to maturity. Western psychodynamic theory has tended to presume that autonomy of the self entails the *individuation* of the self (the self separated from the other by clear and firm boundaries). Such theorization has also presumed that individuation is necessary for agency. There has been a tendency to naturalize the individuated self as the only possible repository of an agential self. Relationality, in these frameworks, is not only an obstacle to maturity but destructive of agency.

(4)

However, Joseph asserts that it “is productive to view persons in Arab societies as embedded in relational matrices that shape their sense of self, but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency” (11). Therefore, in the case of Iraqi North American narratives the concept of relational remembering does not eliminate the narrators’ sense of agency and independence; instead these women use the memories and stories of their family members and friends to retell their own histories and to piece together a sense of self that is able to defragment the past traumas of war, oppression, and diaspora.

For Iraqi North American life narrators, the act of writing about their experiences includes writing about their families and communities as well. However, the act of writing their experiences separates them from other Iraqi women who are bound by family and social restrictions, thus affirming individuality. The point of independency from the family begins with the act of narration, as Najda Odeh explains: “Writing autobiography means violating privacy, And in Arabi-Islamic society, where private life, family life, inner feelings and thoughts are sacrosanct, this is a risky undertaking particularly for women” (263). The act of writing their life narratives become announcements of separation from the confines of restrictions and loyalties, as will be seen in the work of Zainab Salbi. The connection to family, although strong, becomes secondary to the concept of constructing an independent self, which is at the core of their narratives.

3.2. Postcolonial Theory: Complicating the Postcolonial

This Study is also framed within postcolonial theory; however, in the process of doing research for this study, one of the main issues that I confronted was the fact that Iraqis are now

living a new form of imperialism since the first Gulf War in 1991; therefore, I found that framing the work within postcolonial theory is debatable in itself. At first, I considered these texts as postcolonial because they reflect the definition of postcolonial writing provided by Biscaia, which states that “postcolonial writing distinguishes itself by its corrective motivations either of denouncing violence, giving voice to the silenced, valuing the local or attempting to reconcile the individual with her/his various fragmentary selves” (20). Through their narratives, these women are able to uncover some of the postcolonial struggles that Iraqi women have faced over decades of wars, revolutions, and sanctions. Dennis Walder’s (1998) depiction of post-colonialism also raises some issues pertaining to the validity of the term itself, as he explains:

[T]he implication that the colonial experience persists despite the withdrawal of political control, as a result of the continuing strategic and economic power of the former colonizers, the new global dispositions which keep groups of poorer states in thrall; and because . . . however minimal the impact of empire upon a particular people in the long perspective has always left an imprint. (3)

Thus, postcolonial theorists must consider that colonialism in the 21st century has been changed to occupation and neo-imperialism due to the activities mainly of the United States, and to a lesser extent, Canada and Britain in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. While the European empires may have lost their colonial powers during the first half of the 20th century, they have been replaced by “American hegemony” (Walder 4) that has ignited issues of globalization, mass migrations, and “the creation of multicultural societies” (4). While the United States is not the only Western country to hold the position of the occupier, it is the most prominent of these countries.

In the introduction to *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2005), the authors write: “The

shadow the 2003 US invasion of Iraq casts on the twenty-first century make it more absurd than ever to speak of ours as a postcolonial world” (Loomba, Kaul, Bunzl, Burton, and Esty 1). Furthermore, there is a need to understand the complications of this approach when discussing the life writing of Iraqi women, like Valentine Balass, who have lived through the massive political upheavals in their country or, like Dunya Mikhail, who have found themselves in the middle of recurring wars brought on by Western powers. For the Iraqi people, and for Arabs in general, the twentieth century has only brought about several forms of economic, cultural, and political occupation. The Iraqi people have moved from a state of colonization under British rule in the beginning of the 20th century only to find themselves in a state of occupation by a neo-imperialist power, the United States, at the end of the same century.

Childs and Peters point out that “imperialism is an ideological concept which upholds the legitimacy of the economic and military control of one nation by another” (qtd in McLeod 7). The definition thus describes the current political and economic condition of Iraq, in which the United States has been and is in control of the country for the past 22 years, “securing wealth and power through the continuing exploitations” of that nation (McLeod 8). Fouskas and Gökay state that

the new American imperialism was applied as a justification for an unprovoked war against Iraq by the neoconservative administration of the U.S. government, toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime without the support of the United Nations and in the face of strong opposition from traditional U.S. allies was a clear presentation of a unilateralist American foreign policy. The ‘regime change’ in Baghdad, however, was only an opening salvo in a much broader neoconservative agenda that seeks to reshape American hegemonic practices according to old

imperial doctrines, but with postcolonial political and military tools. (3)

However, looking back at Iraqi history, the nation has not actually been free of occupation since the expansions of Ottoman rule in the region in the 16th century.¹² From Ottoman rule to British colonization to the military and economic U.S. occupation, Iraq and its people have not actually been “decolonized.” As the overt existence of foreign rule edged out of the area, the foreign influence on the cultural and political fronts of the country were still intact. Stuart Hall maintains that,

the ‘after-effects’ of this pervasive type of indirect colonial hegemony is then ‘lived’ and ‘re- worked’ through the various ‘internal’ crises of the post-colonial states and societies of the Gulf States, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, not to speak of Palestine and Israel. In this scenario, ‘the colonial’ is not dead, since it lives on in its ‘after-effects’. But its politics can certainly no longer be mapped completely back into, nor declared to be ‘the same’ in the post-colonial moment as it was during the period of the British mandate. These complexities and re-stagings have become a common feature in many parts of the ‘post- colonial’ world, although there have also been other ‘decolonising’ trajectories, both earlier ones and ones with significantly different outcomes. (248)

Thus the impact of the Turks and later the British has been a part of the culture and the educational system for many generations, and now the U.S. influence is in limitless expansion. Miriam Cooke adds to the argument that,

decolonization eliminates the physical representation of power, but in its ruins linger the seeds of a new hegemony that retains its base in the EuroAmerican sphere but that has assumed the anonymity of global capital and culture. In the

information age, individuals are increasingly scattered outside of what they had considered to be their homes and are forced to create new linkages, imagine new histories. (“Women, Religion” 156)

While the physical colonial influence may have left Iraq in the early 20th century, the effects of that colonization remained strong. During the mid and second half of the 20th century, the influence of the West, mainly the U.S., was significant. The United States made “it its business to export counter-revolution, working ceaselessly, sometimes directly, sometimes covertly, to undermine, subvert, and overthrow regimes and movements which it deem[ed] to have stood in opposition to its interests and political philosophy” (Lazarus 39). According to sources like Vassilis K. Fouskas and Bülent Gökay (2005), the influence of U.S. intelligence began as early as 1957 when Saddam Hussein, then a new member of the Baath Party, became an agent of the CIA (194), as both parties shared similar anti-Communist interests. Fouskas and Gökay cite an article by Richard Sale, “Exclusive: Saddam Was Key In Early CIA Plot” (2003), in which Sale argues the direct U.S. influence on the shaping and establishment of the democratic Iraqi government in the second half of the 20th century. Derek Gregory adds that “[a]fter the Second World War the United States intervened time and time again in the political economy of Iraq, with increasing force and increasing British complicity. . . . America’s geopolitical interest in Iraq increased, but for the most part it preferred to work behind the scenes” (145). Nevertheless, Iraq is not the only country to be affected by American political and military neo-imperialist expansion as the U.S. has “managed to deploy troops in at least 135, or 70 percent, of all the UN member countries” (Fouskas and Gökay 72). The spread of US power around the world only supports the concept of American neo-imperialism that was officially instigated with the Gulf Wars in Iraq. As Jay Bookman claims, the second Gulf War marked the “official emergence of

the United States as a full-fledged global empire, seizing sole responsibility and authority as planetary policemen.... Rome did not stoop to containment; it conquered. And so, the thinking goes, should we” (qtd. in Cooppan 83). Thus, for Iraq, like the many other countries now under US influence, the concept of decolonization or actual liberation was never really established.

Within this concept of neo-imperialist occupation, the approach to Iraqi North American life writing is further complicated with layers of political and cultural depth that reflect the unique situation of Iraqi identity. Instead of framing this research within a “clear” and straightforward postcolonial approach to the works selected, the study has to take into consideration the many obstacles that these women face when trying to define themselves as Iraqis, as Arabs, as immigrants, and finally as Iraqi North Americans.

3.2.1. Postcolonial Positions

Within postcolonial theory the concept of place is tightly connected to the concept of identity formation. According to Teverson and Upstone (2011), “[t]he idea that place plays a significant role in how one defines one’s own identity and, equally, how that identity is defined by others, is continually foregrounded in postcolonial studies” (2). In the life narratives of Iraqi North American women, the concept of self and place is complicated by changes beyond their control. Forces represented by patriarchal governments and institutions threaten the sense of safety experienced within the confines of home, neighborhood, and country. Place is the tangible “center of one’s memory and experience” (Brennan 130), thus the loss of place brings about a loss of identity that is connected to that specific place. Furthermore, within this discussion of place, theories of “the third space,” play a major role. In *The Location of Culture* (2004), Homi Bhabha states that the “non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a

cultural space -- a third space--where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences. . . Hybrid hyphenizations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities” (312, 313). Hybridity of identity within a third space is a crucial element for Iraqi North American women writers and narrators due to the necessity of establishing a connection between themselves and their new culture.

Within Bhabha’s concept of “the third space,” the concept of identity becomes a negotiation between contradictions as Hayan Charara claims (2008). Charara applies his concept to poets; however, I feel that this concept also establishes a base for understanding how Iraqi North American autobiographers negotiate their own identities. Charara maintains that the writer “must negotiate the contradictions between [her]self and [her] ancestors, [her]self and those ‘unlike’ [her], as well as between [her]self and those ‘almost’ like [her]” (xiv). By trying to become part of the new culture, Iraqi North American women have to re-negotiate some of the characteristics that comprise their unique identities. Through the re-construction of the self in a new space, these Iraqi North American life narrators are able to defragment their identities and establish themselves as both Iraqis and North American women, without forfeiting one identity or the other.

4. Chapter Divisions

I will begin this study by positioning contemporary Iraqi women's life writing within the historical context of Iraqi diasporic history and the wider critical context of Arab North American literary culture. The first section of chapter one of my dissertation examines the history of Arabs, their identity as defined by the West and by Arabs themselves through historical, cultural, and political references. Section Two will include a brief history of Iraq, the

deportation of Jewish Iraqis, and the Iraqi wars between 1980-2003. Section three will discuss Arab migration to the United States and Canada and the complications of identity within these contexts. I would like to add that some information may seem to overlap when discussing Arab and Iraqi history; however I feel it is necessary to present these issues to the reader for better understanding of these histories, which are unique no matter how similar they may seem to the general Western reader.

The second chapter of my dissertation will examine the concepts of trauma and displacement as major components in the fragmentation of identity in the life narratives of Iraqi North American women. The term trauma began to be used as a medical term to describe the mental condition rather than the physical in the late 19th century (Luckhurst 5). In *Trauma Fiction* (2004) Anne Whitehead claims that trauma theory “emerged in the United States in the early 1900s” as “it sought to elaborate on the cultural and ethical implications of trauma” (4), yet “the origin of contemporary trauma studies can be usefully dated to 1980” with the rise of awareness of PTSD in the Vietnam War. However, E. Ann Kaplan, in her introduction to *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005), provides a much earlier date than Whitehead’s as she states that trauma studies “originated in the context of research about the Holocaust” (2). Nevertheless, in general trauma studies expanded considerably after the Second World War as trauma was approached in a number of different fields. The most cited research on trauma in its relation to memory have been done by Cathy Caruth, specifically her works *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma Narrative and History* (1996). In the latter work she explores “the ways in which texts of a certain period—the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature, and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience” (4).

Caruth asserts that trauma is not fully comprehended at the time of the incident, but rather as a “belated experience” (7) that takes place after the incident has taken place.

Furthermore, the term trauma, as Dominick LaCapra asserts, “invites distortion, disrupts genres or bounded areas, and threatens to collapse distinctions;” therefore “no genre or discipline ‘owns’ trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it” (96). Yet, these complications have not stopped scholars from trying to negotiate and establish these boundaries. For these Iraqi North American life narrators a separation between the past self and the narrating self is the only way that they can fully confront their past traumas and renegotiate their identities as active agents, rather than as passive victims.

In addition to trauma, these Iraqi North American life narrators experience displacement on a number of levels. Through immigration, asylum seeking, and exile, Iraqi women, with or without their families, have fled their home country in search of safety and a sense of stability. Like other migrants and refugees around the world, they “have constantly been compelled to seek access to rights and entitlements, or ‘protection,’ outside their home community” (Betts 1) due to the life-threatening situations amidst political changes and wars. Although Iraqi migration began in the mid twentieth century with the expulsion of the majority of Jewish Iraqis, the most significant numbers were seen during the 1990s sanctions and after the second Gulf War. A massive number of 5.1 million Iraqis have been displaced, according to Associated Press sources (2008), in order to find sanctuary in other places. Their movement from their homes to other countries or even to other cities and towns, through “internal displacement” (Betts 7) within Iraqi borders, has led to negotiations of identity and belonging among these people. The situation in Iraq is one of these essential changes that have led to demographic alterations in the Middle East and in migrant hosting countries such as Canada and the United States. Dena Al-Adeeb states

that the “present neo-imperial and neocolonial occupation/war of Iraq and the violence that has engulfed Iraq and Iraqi society has resulted in the fastest growing refugee and displaced population (within and outside Iraq) in the world” (127). Iraqi narratives that depict migration and displacement should be considered within the frame of postcolonial autobiography discourse and, furthermore, the Iraqi experience should be a part of current debates on diasporic identity.

According to Jopi Nyman in his work *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction* (2009), “[D]iasporic identity can be addressed as a form of hybridized identity, as it is in the space of inbetweenness where the diasporic subject reconstructs itself, problematizing the issues of home, belonging and nation” (22). Within the space of inbetweenness, Iraqi North American women have to deal with vast differences between Western and Middle Eastern cultures; the transformation entails not just a change of place but an acceptance or understanding of a new culture, sometimes a new religion and a new identity. In this liminal space, a transnational hybrid identity is formed, which allows the immigrant to amalgamate the culture(s) of the homeland with that of the host nation and establish a self that can adapt to both. Diaspora and displacement lead to a development of new characteristics in Iraqi North American identities as people add to their own understanding of themselves and the environment around them. Moreover, Thapan argues that because identity is a product of social construction and always fabricated, it is therefore an “ongoing process” (29). Immigrant identities are “continually transformed by the journey” and they conceive their identities in “terms of movement, implying that one is never completely breaking away from the past ‘home’” (29). Thus, Iraqi North American women, like many other immigrants, have to “develop strategies to deal with this tremendous sense of dislocation” (30). Although the gap between “resemblance and identity” for these women is filled in by a “symbolic and metaphoric reunion”

(Naficy 288-89), at the same time, the dislocation cannot be relocated through “metaphorical and narratological” (Thapan 30) images of the past alone. These women are bound to the past that they must narrate and explain through their stories in order to reach a defragmented identity that enables them to live in the present and comprehend the past more clearly.

Chapter three will focus on the concept of defragmentation in the autobiographical works of Iraqi North American Women. The process of recollecting and narrating past memories allows Iraqi North American women to confront their experiences, piece together their pasts, and retell their stories. This process ultimately leads towards an understanding of their experiences and thus defragmenting their identities while establishing newly formed selves. The chapter will focus on three major issues that lead to defragmentation in the life narration of these four Iraqi North American women: the act of self narration, relationality, and resistance.

Scholars like Geoffrey Nash (2007) have argued that “women’s and postcolonial writing can often be construed as operating against the grain of canonical, ‘public’ writing and therefore being less concerned with the creation of stable, confident unified subjects” (158). However, Iraqi North American women autobiographers resist adhering to this concept. Through writing (or retelling) their experiences these women resist the fragmentation of identity due to the consequences of a male-oriented war. The incidents that are hidden, forgotten and avoided are addressed and reimagined in the consciousness, which leads to the rebuilding of the self that is capable of confronting the past. Thus autobiography becomes “both an act of assertion of one’s individual identity as opposed to and distinct from the social identity within the group—‘an act of defiance’— both personal and political” (184-85), as Daphne Grace states in *Relocating Consciousness: Diasporic Writers and the Dynamics of Literary Experience* (2007). The act of writing and narration for Arab women in general is a “key means of voicing their ‘silenced’

narratives. Women write and narrate to negotiate a ‘textual, sexual, and linguistic space” for themselves” (Lentin; qtd. in Grace 185). Through life narration these narrators establish female identities that confront Western stereotypes of Arab women and establish more complex Arab North American female selves in the diaspora.

Notes

1. I refer to the Syrian Migrations that have resulted from the Syrian people's uprising in 2011.
2. I have found some scholarship on British Iraqi writers, such as Haifa Zangana.
3. I refer here to Suman Gupta's *Imagining Iraq: Literature in English and the Iraq Invasion* in his chapter "Windows into life-Worlds: Blogs and Conclusion." Gupta discusses two postwar blogs by Iraqi women, *Baghdad Burning* and *IraqiGirl*.
4. This issue will be elaborately discussed in Chapter One of this study.
5. Whitlock also refers to Pax's edited and published weblog titled *Salam Pax: The Clandestine Diary of an Ordinary Iraqi* (2003).
6. Sasson writes about the lives of Middle Eastern Women. Her works include *Princess: A True Story of life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (2001) and *Growing Up bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us into their Secret World* (2009).
7. I use the term Arab Iraqi here to distinguish between other Iraqi ethnicities like Kurdish and Turkoman.
8. Campbell presents the views set by theorists like Otto Weininger and John Locke, which undermine women's ability to represent their past. She writes, "I use Weininger to draw attention to an account of women and memory that explicitly makes the case that women are not competent rememberers or testifiers because they lack a sense of self" (102).
9. As an example see Susan Cahill's work *Writing Women's Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Narratives by Twentieth-Century American Women Writers* (1994).

- ^{10.} In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow states that her initial theories on the topic began in an article titled, “Family Structure and Feminine Personality” (viii).
- ^{11.} Hassan refers to their work titled *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* by Deleuze and Guattar.
- ^{12.} The issue of foreign occupation of Iraq will be discussed further in Chapter One of this study.

Chapter One

A Historical and Cultural Introduction

1. The Arabs

...there is one thing of which I am certain: we need to get to know each other better, because in the end, the destiny of the Arabs will affect the destiny of us all.
David Lambert, *The Arabs: Journeys Beyond the Mirage* (xvi)

“Of all the lands comparable to Arabia in size, and of all the peoples approaching the Arabs in historical importance, no country and no nationality have perhaps received so little consideration and study in modern times as have Arabia and the Arabs” (Hitti 3). This assertion is the opening statement to Philip K. Hitti’s book *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, first published in 1937. Hitti, a native of “Arabia,” more precisely a native of the Ottoman state of Syria,¹ believed that the Arab world was mysterious to the West to the point that he compared the West’s knowledge about the Arctic regions to be more than their knowledge about Arabia at the time (3).² The history of the Arabs is difficult to describe in a chapter or even in a book, as Philip Hitti tried to do in his 800-page book on the history of Arabs. Some seventy years later, the Arab world, although now more relatively well known, is still poorly understood by Westerners.

From a linguistic approach, the word “Arab”³ was first found in the Assyrian writings that date back to 853 BC. Subsequently, the word was used more frequently until around the sixth century BC; these writings referred to “Aribi,” “Arabu,” and “Urbi” (Bernard Lewis 3). Later the word was also recorded in southern Arabian writings found in Yemen around the pre-Christian and early Christian eras (4). The word was then established by the Arabs themselves during the first part of the Islamic period to identify those who descended from an Arab tribe, originated

from the Arabian Peninsula, and spoke Arabic (5-6).

In most historical sources, the Arabs are identified as the inhabitants of the Arab Peninsula.⁴ Arabs, in such sources, spoke different Arabic dialects and depended on oases as sources for survival and cultivation. Albert Hourani describes them as two groups made up of nomads and sedentary people. He explains:

Some of them were nomads who pastured camels, sheep or goats by using the scanty water resources of the desert; these have traditionally been known as 'beduin'. Some were settled cultivators tending their grain or palm trees in the oases, or traders and craftsmen in small market towns; some combined more than one way of life. The balance between the nomadic and sedentary peoples was precarious. Although they were a minority of the population, it was the camel-nomads, mobile and carrying arms, who, together with merchant groups in the towns, dominated the cultivators and craftsmen. Their ethos of courage, hospitality, loyalty to family and pride of ancestry was also dominant. They were not controlled by a stable power of coercion, but were led by chiefs belonging to families around which there gathered more or less lasting groups of supporters, expressing their cohesion and loyalty in the idiom of common ancestry; such groups are usually called tribes. (10)

Many sources like Hourani's consider the beginning of Arab identity to be connected to the emergence of Islam. As the greater empires to the north, like the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Empire began to lose power, a new order of power ascended in the Arabian Peninsula. United under the banner of Islam the Arabs began their first steps to establishing their own empire, which would later reach from Spain in the west to India and China in the east.

Arabs before Islam remained loyal only to their own tribes and family cultures; therefore their identities were shaped by these social groups. Their culture, language, and beliefs differed (to an extent) from each other; thus it is difficult to study their history as one group of people without noting the distinctions among them. At the same time, the “process of Islamization and to a lesser extent Arabization, created specific social, cultural and religious bonds that gave the Middle East its cohesion” (Al-Rodhan, Herd, and Watanabe 27). Thus the Arab people with all their diverse cultures, languages, and even religions were framed into one collective identity as Muslim Arabs, especially in Western perspectives.

One of the earliest works that addressed the topic of Arabs and Arab culture by an Arab was Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*⁵ ‘Introduction or Prolegomena’ in the 14th century. Nissim Rejwan⁶ maintains Ibn Khaldun ‘The Son of Khaldun’ (1332- 1406) to be the only writer in Arabic to “who attempted a serious sociocultural study of the Arabs up through the Middle Ages” (1). Ibn Khaldun’s work has been cited by almost all the scholars referred to in this chapter due to the magnitude of the documentation and details provided in his research. Bernard Lewis, a scholar in Oriental studies, even goes so far as to say that Ibn Khaldun was “the greatest historian of the Arabs and perhaps the greatest historical thinker of the middle ages” (147). Through his *Introduction*,⁷ Ibn Khaldun “re-evaluates, in an altogether unprecedented way, practically every single individual manifestation of a great and highly developed civilization” (Rejwan 2). Ibn Khaldun’s work is considered the first historical and sociological study to portray the accounts of Arab culture and heritage. Within a sociological context, Ibn Khaldun uses the word “Bedouin” synonymously with the word “Arab” in his second chapter of Book One, titled “Bedouin Civilization, Savage Nations and Tribes and their Conditions of Life” (Ibn Khaldun 91). He refers to the Arabs as a nomadic people who were connected through culture

and ethnicity. But the word nomad or Bedouin does not refer to the concept of wanderer; rather it represents the ability to adapt to one of the harshest climates of desert conditions; within this climate these people had to learn to survive through tenacity and persistence (Hitti, *The Arabs* 7,8). The most important characteristic of Arab Bedouin identity was (and is) that it is a collective identity. Within the tribe, there is no individualism, as Lewis explains:

In Beduin society the social unit is the group, not the individual. The latter has rights and duties only as a member of his group. The group is held together by the need for self-defence against the hardships and dangers of desert life, internally by the blood-tie of descent in the male line which is the basic social bond. . . .The tribe does not usually admit of private landed property, but exercises collective rights over pastures, water sources, etc. (24)

While Ibn Khaldun may have given the first descriptions of Arabs, there was a lack of similar studies throughout history and references to this group of people. The research differs greatly from one writer to the next depending on the writer's beliefs, nationality and even the context in which he or she is writing. H.A.R. Gibb, the British Orientalist, even claims that he had not seen "a single book written by an Arab of any branch in any Western language that has made it possible for the Western student to understand the roots of Arab culture," and he asserts, "I have not seen any book written in Arabic for that matter by the Arabs themselves which has clearly analyzed what Arabic culture means for the Arabs" (60). As stated earlier, it could be that scholars have found difficulty in narrating a unified history of Arab people because Arabs do not come from one country, or culture, or religion. The concept of nation in Arab cultures differs from that in Western perception, as Bernard Lewis states: "The Arabs may be a nation; they are not a nationality in the legal senseThere are Arab states, and indeed a league of Arab states;

but there is no single Arab state of which all Arabs are nationals” (1). Lewis quotes Gibb in defining Arabs as, “All those [...] for whom the central fact of history is the mission of Muhammad and the memory of the Arab Empire and who in addition cherish the Arabic tongue and its cultural heritage as their common possession” (2). In addition, Lewis quotes Arab leaders (whom he does not name), who define an Arab as any person who “lives in our country, speaks our language, is brought up in our culture and takes pride in our glory is one of us” (2). While both definitions are similar in pointing to the importance of language and culture in the structure of Arab identity, the Orientalist point of view is limiting, in the sense that it excludes (Arab) people who are not Muslims.

Two major assumptions are made in the West about Arabs: the first is that they are all Muslims and the second is that they are the people who make up the Middle East. Concerning religion in the Arab countries, Arabs make up only 16% ⁸ of the world’s Muslim population, which is estimated around 1.7 billion in 44 countries (considered to have a majority Muslim population). Islam is, however, the religion of 90% of the Arab population. The other 10% percent is made up of mainly Christians, Jews and other minority religions in Arab countries (Kayyali 2). The second major assumption is that the Middle East is made up of Arab countries or Arabic speaking peoples only. Actually, in addition to Arab countries located in Africa and Asia, the Middle East includes Turkey, Iran, Israel and also Kurdish territories in Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. In some sources even Pakistan and Afghanistan are included in the definition. Dan Smith states that the term “Middle East” is “identifiably imperial in origin,” and also that there is “significant uncertainty, and contention too, about what is included in the region” (8). He explains that this uncertainty is due to the fact that the concept of “Middle East” itself is political; in “defining it, judgements [sic] are made about some of the key issues that preoccupy

it and the key factors that constitute it” (8). Arab identity itself is more complicated and more controversial than a mere single definition. The definition of Arab identity is frequently oversimplified as it includes, but is not limited to, any person who speaks Arabic, lives in a prominently Arab country, descends from the Arab Peninsula, and shares a form of history or culture with Arab peoples. For instance, as far as language is concerned, most “of the people from Morocco to Iraq speak Arabic,” but “there are 2,000 spoken dialects of Arabic [which] are quite diverse and until recently not always mutually comprehensible,” asserts Juan Cole, Director of South Asian Studies at the University of Michigan. He continues by stating,

“Arab” is not a racial category. There are anyway no such things as races in the way they are popularly imagined. But even on that level the “Arabs” are just people who speak a language. The northern Sudanese are black Africans but speak Arabic. The Red Sea port city of Massawa in Eritrea (formerly Ethiopia) is largely Arabic-speaking because of historical trading patterns, though the population is African. On the other hand, there are blue-eyed, fair-haired Arabs in the Levant, presumably descendants of the Crusaders. About a third of Israelis are Arab Jews, i.e., Jews from Arabic-speaking countries who traditionally spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. (1)

While Cole’s description focuses on the concept of language as a main characteristic that connects these people and these countries, he includes any Arab-speaking peoples who have mastered the language to a point of communication, even if it is only for the sake of trade. At the same time, he makes some very important points that complicate Arab identity.

The idea of a unified Arab identity seems to have stemmed from the Islamic conquests of the 7th century, which were “a symbol of Arab unity and victory” (Bernard Lewis 55) for the

once divided Arab tribes and provinces; they found power through this new found unity and strength against the threatening invasions of the northern empires. The unity under one leader or Khalif⁹ and the weakness of the northern empires led to the expansion of conquests and the establishment of the Arab empire. In 634 AD this newly established strength led to expansion from Western Arabia (the Arabian Peninsula or Hijaz). Al-Rodhan, Herd, and Watanabe maintain that the “Arab-Islamic Empire expanded at an incredible pace. Within ten years, the Arabs had driven the Sasanids out of Persia and occupied Palestine and present day Iraq, Syria and Egypt” (27). Lewis adds, that “[i]nitially the great conquests were an expansion not of Islam but of the Arab nation” (55); however, their conquests did not erase the identity of the people they conquered. They “did not interfere with the internal civil and religious administration of the conquered peoples” (58). Therefore, the conquered communities maintained their original language, traditions and even their religions, if they were unwilling to convert.¹⁰ Some of the first Muslim Khalifs restrained their armies from perpetrating any unnecessary bloodshed. Commands were issued with statements such as:

[The Khalif] grants to all, whether sick or sound, security for their lives, their possessions, their churches and their crosses, and for all that concerns their religion. Their churches shall not be changed into dwelling places, nor destroyed, neither shall they nor their appurtenances be in any way diminished, nor their crosses [nor possessions]. . . nor shall any one of them be harmed. (Travis 22)

Therefore the spread of Islamic rule mainly led to the spread of the Arab language throughout the conquered states and communities. Thus Arab identity began to include other religions and cultures, which differed from those of the Arab Peninsula.

During the Umayyad Calphate (661-750 AD) the conquests led to the expansion of the

Arab empire and the spread of Islam towards Africa, Europe, and central Asia. The peak of power and development was during Abbasid Calphate (750-1258 AD), in which the empire gained significant economic power. With these expansions and developments came cultural and social developments that led to redefining Arab identity:

[A]n important change was taking place in the meaning of the word Arab itself. From this time onwards the Arabs ceased to be a closed hereditary caste and became a people ready to accept, by a sort of naturalization, any Muslim speaking Arabic as one of themselves. . . . The process of Arabization in the provinces west of Iran was assisted by the settlement of the demobilized Arabs, by the predominance of the Arabic language in the towns and from them in the surrounding countryside. (Lewis 100)

Therefore, conquests, which began under the Islamic banner, later began to affect the cultural characteristics of the conquered, leading not only to the spread of Islam but also to the spread of Arabic and “Arabism.” Unlike the Umayyads, who believed that loyalty to the Arab nation was built on ethnicity, the Abbasids were less strict about legitimate ethnicity; they encouraged a collective unity through religious terms and beliefs which rendered ethnic diversity irrelevant (Al-Rodhan, Herd, and Watanabe 31).

The great Arab dynasty, however, soon began to lose its power over the provinces: the Abbasid Calphate lost Spain in 756, then Morocco in 788, Tunisia in 800, and finally Egypt in 868 (Bernard Lewis 104). The strength of the Arab rulers seemed to have ended with Haroun Al-Rashid, “recognized as marking the highest pinnacle of glory achieved by the Abbasids, perhaps even by the Arab empire throughout history”¹¹ (Glubb 285). The Khalifs who came after him were weaker in both leadership and military conquests. The ultimate blow to the Arab empire

came with the attack of the Mongols in 1258 AD. “With [Baghdad’s] fall,” writes Hitti, “Arab hegemony was lost forever” (*History* 484). The history of Arabs as a united empire ended in 1258, from that date to the 15th century the Arab provinces were broken up and led by a number of different successors, like the Mamluks (1250-1517), the Marinid dynasty (1244-1465), and smaller states to the east (Hourani 85). The Arabs did not unite under one rule until the occupation of the Ottomans in the 16th century.

The Ottomans ruled the Arab world for 400 years, and the fact that the Ottoman state was Muslim led to the reinforcement of the Arabic language. Even the sciences of religion and law were taught in Arabic¹² (Hourani 239). Some of the culture, beliefs and social dynamics remained for the Arabs close to what they had been under Arab rule. However, as “institutions and codes of social morality on which Ottoman strength had rested” (249) began to deteriorate, so did their influence on the region. Over the years the Arabs began to suffer poverty, plagues, and famine, which all led to more unrest. Furthermore, new powers were in the political arena: the Europeans. The European invasion of the Arab states began with Napoleon Bonaparte’s arrival in Alexandria, Egypt in 1798 (Hitti 721). Although it may seem that the French invasion opened the eyes of European powers towards the Near East as the “storm centre of European intrigue and diplomacy” (722), at the same time Said argues that the European invasion of the Middle East was never sudden; instead it was “a long and slow process of appropriation by which Europe, or the European awareness of the Orient, transformed itself from being textual and contemplative into being administrative and, economic, and even military” (*Orientalism* 210).

By the 19th century Europe began to dominate the world with industry, technology, and transportation, and an increase in military power (Hourani 263). These developments also led

conquests of Arab States in North Africa; “the first major conquest of an Arab-speaking country was that of Algeria by France (1830-47)” (263). The struggle between the Ottomans and Europeans for the occupation the Arab states finally ended with the termination of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Although the Ottomans were occupiers, their four centuries of reign kept the Arabs more or less together as one people; thus the concept of division was feared, especially by nationalists who longed for an Arab state (Rogan 147). The end of World War I witnessed the rise of Arab nationalism and a need to find independence, not only from the Ottomans, but also from future occupying powers (Dan Smith 32). The desire for the Arabs to be united under one leader, as they were under the Muslim Khalifs, became a potent argument for Pan-Arab nationalists (Kennedy 66). Groups of “Arab-speaking elite” and local leaders began to form secret societies, which supported the concept of Arab nationalism and “resist[ed] centralization within the Ottoman regime” (Al-Rohdan, Herd, and Watanabe 62), but also sought independence from European rule. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Arab provinces had a brief taste of freedom, which was hastily ended due to the partitioning of the region by Entente powers: “instead of a large single state [the British] created a patchwork of smaller ones” (33). Arab lands once again fell under occupation, this time as separate countries with borders to ensure each of the European allies their portion of land in the Middle East and North Africa.

Two major agreements were made during this time in Arab history. The first is the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and the second is the Balfour Declaration (1917). The former, to sum up briefly, was built on secret six-week negotiations between Britain, represented by Middle East expert Sir Mark Sykes and France, represented by Charles Francois George-Picot, to partition the Ottoman Empire between these two European powers. France was “‘given’ control of a significant area of Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean coastline and influence in the northern

and north-western parts” (26), while Britain took control of the Gulf coast, Iraq, Egypt, The Sudan, Jordan and Palestine (25,26). According to critics like Al-Rohan, Herd, and Watanabe, during these negotiations the British played a dual role. Britain showed support to the Arab leaders, like Sharif Hussein, in the Arabian Peninsula, who felt the need to revolt against the Ottomans, gain independence, and establish an Arab Kingdom. At the same time, the British

envisioned such a kingdom as falling under British influence. Britain was also motivated by the perceived need to secure an important land route to India.

Mesopotamia was also believed to have large oil reserves. As far as the British were concerned, independence from the Ottoman Empire simply meant falling within the sphere of influence of one of the European powers. (64)

Therefore, the lands promised to the Arabs as independent states were secretly distributed between Britain and France leaving the Arabs once again under foreign occupation.

During these negotiations, a second agreement, the Balfour Declaration, was set into motion. The declaration endorsed the World Zionist Organization in the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine (Rogan 154). Although the Balfour Declaration’s official commencement was in 1917, the seeds of this agreement had begun much earlier. Al-Rohdan, Herd, and Watanabe, affirm that

[s]upport for the creation of a Jewish homeland had a longer tradition in Britain.

Chaim Weizmann, a Russian Zionist, who would become a leader among British Zionists and the first prime minister of the State of Israel, had settled in Britain to work as a chemist and was introduced to Lord Balfour as early as 1906. Balfour had hoped to convince Weizmann that the Zionist movement should accept Uganda as a Jewish homeland. Weizmann, however, sought to persuade Lord Balfour that it

should be Palestine. (66)

These two agreements not only changed the geographical face of the Arab world, they also led to a chain of anti-colonial revolts and political revolutions within these newly established Arab states until they reached (some form) of independence during the 20th century.¹³

After the partitioning of the Middle East, Arab countries began to have a distinctive sense of national identity. In the past their allegiances were limited to their loyalty and belonging to a certain village or a particular tribe. The establishment of borders after WWI also determined distinct identities and affiliations to which these tribes and villages became a part. However, the newly set borders for these Arab countries were created around the colonial interests of European countries, who did not, or would not, address the diversity of the people in these newly formed states. The borders, states Martin Kramer, “largely reflected the imperial jostling for strategic position or oil” (Al-Rohdan, Herd, and Watanabe 179). Therefore, countries like Iraq became home to Arabs as well as Kurds, who do not share the same language nor do they have similar political aspirations as the Iraqi Arabs.

Consequently, the newly constructed local identity in the Arab region was accompanied by a rise of Arab nationalism (Alqawmia in Arabic). Arabs seem to have, to some extent, a dual identity when it comes to nationality and belonging. They consider themselves a part of an Arab nation, while at the same time retaining their identity as a part of their mother nation. Arab nationalism¹⁴ is an ideology built on the political unity of the Arab states. The rise and expansion of Arab nationalist ideology began after the European invasion of North Africa and the Near East. The concept of nationalism was built on the basis that Arabs spoke the same language, shared the same history, and faced similar enemies. While Arab nationalism did rise during the mid 20th century, it failed to gain the success desired by its pioneers. Arab nationalism remained

an ideology that was difficult to materialize because of foreign presence in the region, whose interests were threatened by the unity of the Arab states. Thus, Arab countries remained as separate states each defined by its own national identity, traditions and even dialects.

2. Iraq: al-Iraq “having deep roots”¹⁵

2.1. Cultural and Political History

Iraq or Mesopotamia, the “land between the rivers,” as it was named by the Greeks (Worsnip 44), is famous for being home to the first civilizations known in human history. Some of the greatest civilizations, dating back to 3000 BC, thrived along the Tigris and the Euphrates, such as the Sumerian civilization, which was located in the southern part of Iraq. Sumer was home to the first urban centers in the world and witnessed “achievements in the areas of religion, education, literature, and law” (Samuel Noah Kramer 115). While Sumer may have been the first civilization in ancient Iraq, it was not the last. Iraqi soil witnessed the rise and fall of many different groups of people who fought over the dominance of the land. As a part of the fertile crescent, Iraq saw the rise and fall of the Akkadian Empire (24 century BC), the UR Dynasty, Assyria and Babylon. Iraq was the center of trade routes between Asia and the Mediterranean, a fertile land for civilizations and agriculture due to the proximity of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Also Iraq was considered a region of diverse cultures because of its geographical position that linked so many different civilizations. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian add:

Iraq has always been a frontier, across which the boundaries of empires have continually shifted. For much of its history, when it was not the center of empire attracting cultural, social, and political interchange as the Achaemenids or the Abbasid caliphs, the region has been a buffer zone, a swath of territory of

indeterminate width that contracted and expanded, separating empires, peoples and families. (3)

Iraq has been home to people of a number of ethnicities, including Arabs, Kurds, Persians, and Iraqis who embraced Islam, Christianity, Judaism and a number of minority religions like the Yazidi faith. This multicultural, multiethnic mix of races, languages and religions formed a nation, and its people learned to survive and strive together over the centuries.

After centuries of battles over the “Land of Two Rivers” between the main ruling empires in the area, the Sassanid and the Byzantine, the Arabs entered Iraq during the 7th century. In 763 AD Baghdad became the capital of the Arab Islamic Empire during the reign of the Abbasid dynasty. The Caliph Mansoor founded and built Baghdad and named it “The City of Peace,” or Dar-Al-Salam, which was also called the “Round City” (Glubb 246). This era witnessed the development of irrigation, agriculture, industry, trade, education and culture. Iraq reached “the zenith of its prosperity under [caliph] Haroun al Rashid in the late 8th century, when it was considered the richest country in the world” (Worsnip 45, 47). However, Baghdad’s prominence began to fade as the Khalifs began to lose their power over the provinces and their rule began to be undermined by foreign advisors. The city was ultimately destroyed in 1258 AD by the Mongol army under the command of Hulagu and the line of Arab Khalifs was ended. Later in the 16th century, the region fell under the control of the Ottoman Turks until World War I, when it was occupied by the British Empire. Baghdad, unlike the historical “Golden City,” was left to waste during the years following the Mongol invasion; “[i]t had been bypassed by new trading routes established in the sixteenth century that favored sea over land; irrigation canals were in despair and tribal nomads challenged the security of the city” (Simon and Tijirian 36). Although, given the breadth of the Ottoman Empire, Baghdad¹⁶ seemed insignificant, the Persians and the

Ottomans fought over the city for 300 years (36). Overlords and governors changed numerous times, but the Ottomans finally saw potential in the city by the late 19th century. The city, or now province, began to reemerge with the appointment of Midhat Pasha (1869-1872) as governor of Baghdad by the central government in Istanbul. With building and establishment of Western-style schools, the repair of irrigation canals, and the installation of telegraph lines and mail services between Iraq and Syria, Baghdad entered the 20th century with high hopes for development and reform (Simon and Tijirian 37).

However, these changes and developments were mainly meant for the wealthy and foreign settlers and visitors to the area. The British, like the Ottomans, also realized the importance of the region. Britain had already established its presence in the region from the late 18th century through “naval stoppers, mail links, missionary stations...commercial entrepots, and diplomatic residencies from the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf” (Simon and Tijirian 8). Even British companies began to explore possibilities of travel up the Euphrates by the 1930s (8). From Turkish rule to British occupancy, the majority of the Iraqi people entered the 20th century struggling for their independence. Although the 1920 revolution led to some form of release from direct British rule, Britain turned the country into a monarchy in 1921 by placing King Faisal I on the throne. Iraq finally liberated itself from Britain in 1932. Unfortunately, its people did not know peace as the country raged between revolutions, which finally led to the end of the British-imposed monarchy in the late 1950s (Worsnip 47, 49). After its already “long history of political instability and repression” (Lewis 15), Iraq was plunged once again into turmoil with the emergence of different political powers that tried to control the country. Some of these conflicting political powers were represented by groups like pro-British politicians, the Iraqi Communist Party, and the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party. Iraqi history to this point was fairly grim,

but on July 17, 1968, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party took over the country, and with it, came the rule of the notorious Saddam Hussein.

Hussein's power was almost instant following the 1968 revolution. After holding the title of assistant secretary-general of the Ba'ath Party, he became the deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council in Iraq and was in charge of international security. This position may have given Hussein power over the population, but more importantly it brought him a step closer to the highest position in Iraq. Hussein became the president of the Republic of Iraq in June 1979, after he removed Ahmad Hasan Al-Baker (the Iraqi president at the time) from his position, stripped him of his titles and placed him under house arrest (Makiya 316).¹⁷ Hussein became the

chairman of the Council of Ministers, commander in chief of the armed forces, chairman of the RCC, general secretary of the Regional Command of the ABSP, chairman of the Supreme Planning Council, chairman of the Supreme Agricultural Council, and chairman of the Supreme Council for the Compulsory Eradication of Illiteracy, among other things. In addition to these party and state functions, an impressive array of honorific titles and forms of address include the leader-president, the leader-struggler, the standard bearer, the Arab leader, the knight of the Arab nation, the hero of national liberation, the father leader. . . and the daring and aggressive knight. (Makiya 110)

The titles that Makiya relates are some of the few that Hussein granted himself at the time. His power, however, became complete one month later in July 1979 when he ordered the elimination of some of the top leaders in the Ba'ath Party. Makiya states that “ [o]ne third of the members of the RCC [Revolutionary Command Council] [were] executed. By August 1, some five hundred

top-ranking Ba‘thists are said to have been executed” (317). The public confrontation by Hussein and these so-called “traitors” was done on national live television as a warning to all those who were against him or threatened his power. With his undisputed reign, Hussein entered into war with neighboring Iran one year after he became president.

2.1.1. The Effects of Political Changes on the Jewish Community in Iraq

In the midst of political upheaval in Iraq, the Jewish community was one of the most affected. The establishment of Israel and the Six Day War (1967) led to the deportation of thousands of Jews from the country leaving fewer than a hundred Jewish people in Iraq by the second Gulf War. The threat to the Christian community did not take place until after the second Gulf War with the rise of sectarian violence that plagued the country. As John Healy claims, “It is possible that the U.S. and its allies are presiding over and witnessing the final destruction of Christianity in Iraq, bringing to an end a tradition that reaches back almost 2,000 years” (41). The Christian community in Iraq, however, unlike the Jewish community, is well known and well documented due to their continuous presence in the country. Thus, I have included a summary of the latter’s history to enable the reader to understand more clearly the narration of Valentine Balass and the documentary *Baghdad Twist*. Unlike the works by Christian writers like Mikhail and Nadir, the issue of religion in this particular documentary is vital to the concept of displacement that this work provides.

The history of Jews in Iraq begins around four millennia ago; “the growth of their religious beliefs and the shaping of their culture were in one way or other inextricably linked with ‘the land of twin rivers,’ now known as Iraq” (Rejwan *The Jews* 3). After the final raid of Jerusalem in 586 BC¹⁸ and the captivity of its inhabitants by the Babylonian King,

Nebuchadnazzar, thousands of Jews were deported to Babylon (8-9). The exiled Jewish community, according to Rejwan, integrated and developed quickly:

For there was hardly any important vocation, including public office, in which Jews were not represented; the economic activities in which the exiles engaged were even more varied than they were back home. A people of farmers and petty artisans, these Jews entered with alacrity the highest echelons of Babylonia's trade and commerce. But although well integrated in the imperial fabric, these exiles nevertheless retained their cultural and religious identity almost intact. (10)

While a large number of Jews returned to Jerusalem after the fall of Babylon at the hands of Cyrus and his Achaemenid Empire in 539 BC, at the same time many found that the homes and lives they established in exile were more developed and more comfortable. Therefore, many left Jerusalem and returned to resettle in Mesopotamia (16). The Jewish population, in what is now modern day Iraq, became a part of the multicultural fabric of the area, even after the spread of Islam in the region.

As the centuries passed and the Arabs moved North into the Near East and North Africa, these Jews maintained their culture and religion while assimilating into the Arab culture. More Jews migrated to Arab countries, including Iraq, during 1400 AD after the fall of Arab rule in Spain (Shiblak 27). They became a part of the multiethnic and multicultural construct of the Arab countries in which they settled. Abbas Shiblak states, "Iraqi Jews were. . . indigenous to the country. . . . They were thoroughly Arabized in the sense that their tradition, superstitions, and language were Arabic" (34). The Jewish population in Iraq around the 1920s was estimated to be more than 58,000 and grew steadily in the first half of the 20th century. The Jewish community "prided themselves on their deep roots in the region, on the enduring legacy of the Babylonian

geonim, and on their economic and cultural contributions to the building of modern Iraq” (Levy 167). However, with the emergence of Zionism in the late 19th century and, later the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish communities were slowly rejected and evacuated from Iraq and other Arab countries.

The concept of Zionism, which began as a response to anti-Semitism in 19th century Europe, began to take on a wider and stronger presence around the First World War (Shiblak 57). The British support of “an extra-European solution to the “ ‘Jewish Question’ ”¹⁹ in the end of the 20th century led to a number of suggestions and schemes to establish Jewish settlements in the Arab East (57). The migration of Jewish families from different Arab countries to the Holy Land began at least a century before the actual establishment of Israel (Rejwan *The Jews* 201), but these migrations were, according to scholars like Rejwan and Shiblak, based on religious motives, rather than Zionist beliefs. More importantly, Iraqi Jews were not attracted by the concept of Zionism, which many believed to be “a European problem, both by origin and present incidence” as one notable Jewish Iraqi lawyer claimed in 1938 (qtd. in Shiblak 62). The affiliation of the Jewish communities with their Arab identities led many to reject Zionist theory and even refuse, in countries like Iraq and Syria, the concept of a Jewish state.

The Nationalist Jews of Iraq proved their commitment to their country first and foremost, Shiblak relates: “Several Baghdadi Jews joined ranks with Muslims and Christians in denouncing the British policy in Palestine. On 1 September 1919 telegrams were sent by Christians and Jews to *al-Iraq* and *al-Nahda* [Trans. *The Renaissance*] newspapers declaring support for the Arab stand against the Balfour Declaration” (67). At the same time, Iraqi Muslims tried to show their solidarity with Iraqis of other faiths; leaflets began to be distributed to leading Jews and Christians:

To all our Brothers, Christian and Jewish fellow citizens. It is to be made clear to our brothers, that we in this country are partners in happiness and misery. We are brothers and our ancestors lived in friendship and mutual help. Do not consider in any way that the demonstrations carried out by the citizens affect any of your rights. We continue to value and respect our friendship. (Shablak 66)

However, neither Jewish loyalty to the country nor the bonds of national friendship lasted for long. The establishment of Israel and the strict Arab nationalist views led to the collapse of ties between the Jewish Iraqis and other Iraqi citizens of different faiths. At first the changes were merely set to limit the movement and development of Jews in Iraq; however, the

troubles intensified after the disturbances²⁰ in Palestine in 1936, and in September of that year the so-called Committee for the Defense of Palestine, headed by a member of the Chamber of Disputes, issued a manifesto accusing the Jews of Iraq of lending support to the Zionists of Palestine. Three days later, on the eve of the Jewish New Year, two Jews were shot at and murdered while leaving their club, in full view of passers-by. (Rejwan *The Jews* 219)

The threat against Jewish Iraqis escalated as they became the target of angry mobs and rioters in what was named “farhud” or the “violent dispossession” in June of 1941. Even after their open and persistent announcements of loyalty to Iraq, Jewish neighborhoods and businesses were attacked and an estimated 170-180 “Jews were killed and many more wounded, and even larger numbers of non-Jews, including rioters, security men and Muslims who came to the defense of their Jewish neighbors, were among the dead and injured” (222). The solidarity between the diverse Iraqi religious groups was not strong enough to keep Iraqi Jews in the country and their numbers began to dwindle during the mid 20th century. In addition, the passing of “Law 1/1950,”

the denaturalization law, which allowed for the cancellation of Iraqi citizenship of whoever wished to leave the country willingly and never return (Shiblak 104). The law seemed severe for people who had, for generations, been a part of the history of Iraq, however the choice to stay was no longer a safe option. Letal Levy explains:

This illustrious 2,600-year history came to an abrupt end following the events of 1948, when the Arab defeat and subsequent loss of Palestine incited an anti-Jewish backlash, orchestrated in no small part by the government and media. Between 1950 and 1951, some 120,000 Jews—approximately 90 percent of the Iraqi Jewish community—left for Israel and the West in the whole-scale emigration the emigrants referred to as the *tasqit*. The few thousand who remained would gradually trickle out of the country, most fleeing after the Ba‘th-sponsored repression of 1969–71, leaving only some twenty or thirty Jews in the capital to witness the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Whereas in 1950 there were some sixty synagogues in the city, by 1960 that number had been reduced to seven; the last functioning synagogue, in Betawwiyyin (once a largely Jewish neighborhood), has been closed since the 2002 [sic] war due to security considerations. What is amazing, in retrospect, is not how grounded the Jews were in Iraq, but how quickly their presence was erased. (168)

While the Jewish communities in Iraq were not the only ones to flee the country in search of safety, they were one of the largest and first groups of Iraqis to do so. The history and details of Iraqi Jewish exile above set the scene for *Baghdad Twist* and provide the background for the narration of that time of Iraqi history by Valentine Balass, which will be approached later in this work.

2.2. The Three Iraqi Wars

One of the tragedies of the Iraq war is how faceless and nameless its victims have become. The violence has been so rampant, so ubiquitous, that those who've suffered from it are increasingly lost in anonymity.

Khaled Hosseini, "Introduction," *Silent Exodus*

2.2.1 The Iraq- Iran War (1980-1988)

The problems between Iran and Iraq began long before full-blown war between these two countries in 1980. The conflicts between the two nations were over issues like Shatt-Al-arab, the river in which the Tigris and Euphrates meet in the south of Iraq, the waterway that is Iraq's only access to the Arab Gulf (known as the Persian Gulf in the West). Other problems between the two countries concerned land, political power, and the Iranian support of Kurdish uprisings in northern Iraq. In 1979, both countries witnessed changes in political power. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini became leader of the revolutionary Islamic movement and forced the Iranian Shah and his family into exile. Then, in 1980, after the infringement of several agreements of peace between the neighboring countries, Iraq claimed that Iran "abrogated the Algiers Agreement [of March 1975] through 187 border violations" (Makiya 268). The actual war began after "Iranian forces shelled the [bordering] Iraqi towns of Khanaqin and Mandali" with Iraq responding by "occupying the district in which the Iranian artillery had been based" (Stansfield 109). The war "was long, immensely bloody and extremely expensive" (Bickerton and Pearson 25) for Iraq, which had just started to witness development and the building of a modern infrastructure (Worsnip 57). Finally, both "sides suffered enormous losses while fighting each other to a standstill in a conflict that failed to resolve the original issues" (Lyon 134) and by 1985 Iraq had lost 300,000 lives and the Iranians double that number (Travis 396). Heavily in debt, in 1991 it was estimated that Iraq owed \$25.7 billion to Saudi Arabia alone, and exhausted from an eight-

year war, a UN ceasefire was announced.

2.2.2 Gulf War I (1991)

Two years after the ceasefire with Iran on August 8, 1988, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The issue of Kuwait goes back to the British and French partitioning of the Middle-East during World War I, as Kuwait was separated from the province of Basrah in southern Iraq (Bickerton and Pearson 21). The desire to return Kuwait to Iraq was an issue raised by at least two of Iraq's leaders during the 20th century, like King Ghazi in the late 1930s (21). However, Saddam Hussein was the only Iraqi leader to take military action to return Kuwait to Iraq, an operation that required less than a day (Stansfield 126). Of course, the reasons behind the invasion were not solely concerned with the concept of annexing Kuwait; as Hamdi Hassan points out that there are numerous reasons for the invasion including the failing economic status of Iraq after the Iraqi-Iran War.²¹ Not long after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, on August 6, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that authorized worldwide sanctions against Iraq, and on August 23 the UN agreed to station forces in the Gulf (Bickerton and Pearson 57). After many negotiations, the Allied forces launched their attack on Iraq and its army in Kuwait on January 17, 1991 (59). The first Gulf War lasted only 43 days; however, the Iraqi infrastructure was destroyed. Official buildings and communications were not the only targets, as bridges and homes were also bombarded. Unfortunately, even bomb shelters were not safe from the air raids. An unforgettable example for the Iraqis is the bombardment of the Ameria shelter by American air raids, in which around 500 people, mostly women and children, were taking cover. There were very few survivors and the bodies that rescuers were able to pull out were "in a terrible state, charred, mangled and twisted, some of them almost beyond recognition" (Bickerton and

Pearson 123).

On Thursday, February 28, 1991 President George Bush announced, “‘Kuwait is liberated. Iraq’s army is defeated’” (168). While the war with the allied forces ended, Iraq, especially the capital city of Baghdad, was left in a desolate situation as were its people. With no electricity, communications, or main bridges, the Iraqi people had to struggle to sustain the simplest means of living. The destruction of the infrastructure was the least of Iraq’s problems, however, as rebellions began in northern Iraq by the Kurds and in the south by the Shiites. The first signs of uprising began in the south with the breakout of anti Ba’ath demonstrations around Basrah “resulting in the killing of a number of [Ba’ath] Party officials” (Stansfield 131). While the rebellion did not begin in Shiite towns, it quickly spread to their areas and expanded: “Shiite militias rose in rebellion in southern Iraq, hoping to capitalize on Saddam Hussein’s momentary weakness” (Thakur and Sidhu 23). These incidents were then followed by the Kurdish uprising soon after, which although violent, finally led the Kurds to some form of autonomy from the Iraqi government.

The Bush administration at the time encouraged the Iraqi people to revolt against their president; “[o]n February 1991, as the Iraq war raged, President Bush called on the people of Iraq to ‘take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside’” (Thakur and Sidhu 23). The same administration played a double role by later supporting Saddam’s government against the rebels. The betrayal by the US government of the southern rebels was represented by the coalition’s abandonment “as Iraqi Republican Guard swiftly quelled the rebellions, exacting terrible retribution particularly against the Shiites” (23). The Iraqi government’s aggressive reaction crushed the revolt through mass killings and mass live burials in which many innocent lives were lost.

Although the war and the uprisings that followed led to many casualties, the destruction of the infrastructure added to these numbers greatly. The damage to the power plants had

‘brought [Iraq’s] entire system of water purification and distribution to a halt, leading to epidemics of cholera, typhoid fever, and gastroenteritis, particularly among children.’ A United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) survey later found that from January through August 1991 there were approximately 47,000 excess deaths among children less than five years of age. Deaths spiked due to rampant disease spurred by poor water quality compounded by a broken health care system (Otterman, Hil, and Wilson 28).

The Iraqis tried to rebuild the infrastructure and restore their cities to their (somewhat) original state. Six months after the war, communications, bridges and electricity were almost completely back to normal, but Iraqis still had to live through over a decade of sanctions that lasted until the beginning of the second Gulf War in 2003. This isolation from the world deprived the Iraqis of basic essential requirements like medicine, exported goods that fed industry, and supplies needed to rebuild Iraq after two disastrous wars. Furthermore, Iraqis were unable to relate to or participate in the developments taking place in countries just outside their borders. The absence of technological advancement and the lack of up-to-date academic materials for research in almost all fields of education affected the Iraqi people’s ability to progress with the rest of the world. The situation remained somewhat stagnant until the second Gulf War in 2003.

2.2.3 Gulf War II (2003)

Still under the distress of the sanctions, Iraq was forced into a second Gulf War with the United States of America. If the first Gulf War was considered short, lasting only 43 days, the

second Gulf War lasted a mere 21 days. However, the war that began on March 19, 2003 ultimately changed Iraqi history. The United States claimed it had its reasons to engage in war with Iraq. The first reason was the United States War on Terror, which was meant to protect the U.S. from another terrorist attack, like that of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, George W. Bush and his administration wanted to rid the world of Saddam Hussein, which the United States failed to achieve in the first Gulf War, and his threatening weapons of mass destruction, which were never found. Under the name “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” the American army began its attack on Iraq full force. Once again the Iraqi infrastructure was attacked, in addition to all the official buildings that belonged to the Ba’ath regime. Ministries, palaces, bridges, civilian houses and shops were all targeted and destroyed. The skies over Baghdad were black with smoke that did not clear for weeks. The world watched as the American army advanced on Iraq and finally reached Baghdad on April 9, 2003. On that same date the United States declared the fall of Baghdad and the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein.

The country was suddenly left with no leadership, no army, and no security, which facilitated looting and vandalism. The looters, who were mostly impoverished citizens or ex-convicts, “stole anything portable” (Keegan 206), and in the process, “enormous quantities of documents essential to the reorganization and reconstruction were irretrievably dispersed” (206). Sites like the Iraqi National Museum, libraries, universities, colleges and even hospitals were all raided, looted, and some were eventually burned down. But the havoc did not stop there as the instability of power in Iraq led to the rise of organized insurgency that began to attack both the American troops and the representatives of the new Iraqi government. With the insurgency, suicide bombers and car bombings surfaced, which led to a rapid rise in both Iraqi and American death tolls (Keegan 211), which meant around 1250 attacks a week on U.S. troops and 100-300

Iraqis killed on a daily basis²² (Jamail xi) and an estimate of about 1,033,000 Iraqis killed between March 2003 and August 2007 (Otterman, Hil, and Wilson 161). In his forward to *Erasing Iraq: The Human Costs of Carnage* (2010), Dahr Jamail states,

More than 80 months of occupation, with over \$800 billion spent on the war (by conservative estimates), has resulted in 2.2 million internally displaced Iraqis, 2.7 million refugees, 2615 professors, scientists, and doctors killed in cold blood, and 341 dead media workers. Over \$13 billion was misplaced by the current Iraqi government, and another \$400 billion (with some estimates as high as \$1 trillion) is required to rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure. Unemployment vacillates between 25 and 70 percent, depending on the month. There are two dozen car bombs on average per month, 10,000 cases of cholera per year, 4352 dead US soldiers and over 73,000 physically or psychologically wounded soldiers. (x)

A decade after the American invasion of Iraq there is still no stability for the Iraqi people, as many cities still suffer from electricity outages, shortages in running water, and shortages in energy resources for heating and cooking. However, Iraq's greatest loss is the irreversible changes that society and culture have undergone after the second Gulf War: "a legacy of sociocide—the total assault upon Iraqi lives, culture and national identity remains" (Otterman, Hil, and Pearson 162). The loss of freedom for women, the effects on education, and the continued embezzlement of Iraqi historical artifacts are just some of the damages that culture has endured in the country.

One of the most noticeable changes that took place in Iraq after the second Gulf War was the displacement of Iraqi people, both on a local and a transnational level. The first type of displacement occurred within Iraq itself, and although not noticeable immediately after the war,

it began to be a major concern for Iraqis after the bombing of the shrine of Al-Imam Al-Hadi and Al-Askari ²³ (both Imams are buried in this Shrine) in February 2006. The shrine, which is considered sacred by Shiite Muslims, ignited a civil war between them and the Sunni Muslims in the country. The Iraqi people were once known for their religious tolerance and had lived in a diverse culture that allowed for the practice of different religions and beliefs. However, the incidents led to a form of ethnic cleansing that, in turn, led to displacement for both Shiite and Sunni groups who began to feel threatened in their own homes and neighborhoods (Lischer 95). “In March 2008 the International Organization for Migration estimated that 2.4 million Iraqi refugees had fled the country, primarily to Jordan and Syria, and 2.7 million more remained displaced within Iraq” (95). Consequently, transnational displacement has been more devastating for Iraq’s development because it has drained the country of its educated classes, who served the academic and cultural development of the country:

Particularly damaging to Iraqi society has been the massive flight of the professional class since the 2003 invasion. At the beginning of the crisis, the first people to leave Iraq were those with sufficient resources to survive abroad. Targeted threats against professionals also induced this “brain drain.” The Iraqi Medical Association reports that 50 percent of doctors have left Iraq. An Oxfam/NCCI (NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq) study states that at least 40 percent of Iraq’s professional staff has left the country since 2003. More than 230 university professors have been assassinated, and 3,000 have fled the country since 2003. In 2007, deans of three major universities in Baghdad reported that teacher populations had fallen by 80 percent. (Lischer 103)

For many Iraqis, migration to neighboring countries was only a way to apply for immigration to

Europe or North America for the political and economic stability they offered.

2.3. The Effects of War on Iraqi Women

Before the Gulf War in 1991, and, to a lesser extent, during the sanctions, Iraqi women “enjoyed considerable freedom of movement and faced no systemic threats regarding their mobility. Since the [second Gulf] war the situation is aptly characterized as an intensified ‘climate of fear’” (Al-Ali and Pratt *Women and War* 51). The number of women killed, raped and kidnapped rose to extreme numbers in the aftermath of the 2003 war. This physical violence towards women complicates cultural issues in Iraqi society and limits the freedom of women to practice even the simplest of daily tasks, like going to work or school. Al-Ali and Pratt state that women and men experience

violence differentially because of the ways in which femininity and masculinity are constructed. The potential of violence against women may operate to push women back into the home whilst women who experience actual violence may be too scared to admit it due to the repercussions for their ‘reputation,’ leading possibly to their killing at the hands of their own male relatives, who claim to be protecting ‘family honour.’ (*Women and War* 11)

The violence against women in Iraq does not only limit them physically, but it has also greatly affected their academic and cultural development. Before the first Gulf War, the Iraqi educational system, which was compulsory throughout primary and secondary levels, boasted equal learning opportunities for both sexes. However, a steady decrease was seen during the sanctions, especially for girls and women, as Al-Ali and Pratt explain:

There was also a sharp decrease in access to all sectors of education for girls and

young women because many families were not able to afford sending all children to school. Illiteracy, drastically reduced in the 1970s and 1980s, rose steadily after the Iran-Iraq War and grew between 1985 and 1995 from 8 percent to 45 percent. The dropout rate for girls in primary education reached 35 percent (UN Development Fund For Women [UNIFEM] 2004). In the late 1990s, 55 percent of women aged 14 to 49 years were illiterate (UN Office for Coordination of Human Affairs [UN-OCHA] 2006). (*What Kind of Liberation?* 47)

The sanctions may have affected the number of number of girls and women attending school; however, in the aftermath of the second Gulf War some of the main insurgent targets were the intellectuals and academics. In her article “The Right to Rule Ourselves” (2006), Iraqi British journalist and human rights activist Haifa Zangana claims that “many journalists, newspaper editors, and academics (many of them women) have been killed since 2003” (Grace “Arab Women” 183). In the “post-colonial” era of the 21st century the threat posed by intellectuals became greater than the threat of weapons, as Zangana states: “for the occupation to last, or for its aims to be fulfilled, independent minds have to be eradicated. We feel that we are witnessing a deliberate attempt to destroy intellectual life in Iraq” (46). The sense of losing so many Iraqi intellectuals, especially women, initiates an urge to understand their threat to the Islamic fundamentalists and the occupying powers. In addition, Middle Eastern women in general, and Iraqi women in particular, in the last decade have become victims of national and international community violence as “targets of local patriarchal forces that locate women as the upholders of family honour [and] they have now become the target for arrest by U.S. troops who use them in order to access male relatives” (Grace “Arab Women” 187). Iraqi women have been forced into the political scene of their country, but they have remained the unheard voices of the

war and its aftermath. Even during the sanctions “[t]he state augmented men’s patriarchal privileges because it was forced to renegotiate state-society relations in the context of economic crisis and weakened state power due to the severe sanctions regime imposed by the United Nations” (Kamp 199). Nevertheless, women in the Middle East are the “history keepers: the ones who record, document and remember” these incidents and retell them to the next generations (Soueif; qtd. in Grace 2007). The fact that these women have become witnesses to and victims of the violence of war invites an urgent need to understand their perspectives and their contributions to the stories of war and displacement.

3. Arab North Americans: A Brief History

As an immigrant, you are usually confined to a specific space in that metaphoric country called exile. You walk around, a shadow in the background, your dreams of different homelands, your memories of torture, war and all the injustices you have suffered go almost completely undetected by the majority.

Hamida Na’na, *The Homeland*

The term “Arab-American/ Arab Canadian” appeals to me. It allows us to reclaim the word Arab, to force people to hear and say a word that has become synonymous with “crazy Muslim terrorists.” It affirms us and links us to our brothers and sisters in Arab countries.

Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers* (xviii)

Under *race/ethnic origin*
I check white.
I am not a minority on their checklists
and they erase me
with the red end
of a number two pencil.

Laila Halaby, “Browner Shades of White” (204)

Almost all books and articles concerning Arabs in North America contain the recurring reference to the lack of scholarship on this ethnic group. In *Arabs in America: Myths and*

Realities (1975), one of the earliest works on the Arab North American experience, Baha Abu-Laban and Faith T. Zeadey state that “Arabs in the United States and Canada are one of the least studied and yet perhaps one of the most disparaged of all ethnic and minority groups” (ix). This view has not changed over the last forty years. Different writers, usually of Arab descent, repeat the fact that the Arab minority in North America is one of the least studied or researched of all immigrant groups. In this section I present a brief history of the reasons behind Arab migration to North America and also the reasons for the scarcity of documentation on this particular ethnic group.

The general story of Arab immigration to North America is, to some extent, similar in both Canada and the United States; a small number of Arabs began to arrive around the late 19th century and a more noticeable migration began after World War II. The documented history of Arabs in North America begins in the late 19th century with the arrival of Syrian entrepreneurs and peddlers who left their homes and villages in Mount Lebanon and what was known as the Ottoman province of Syria. At the time, these migrants, who were mainly male merchants and peddlers, made up a “mere one hundred thousand by 1914—compared to the millions from Europe” (Naff 2).²⁴ Naff goes on to explain that research on Arab Americans is problematic due to a lack of “primary and secondary sources” (4). The reasons are as follows:

The Syrian’s small numbers and seemingly indistinctive assimilation patterns did not capture the attention of students of American history and society. Another [reason is] that documentation of the culture requires of the student or scholar an expertise in a non-European language whose classical form is understood mainly by the educated and is rarely spoken in informal circumstances. Its spoken, or colloquial form, moreover, is fragmented into a host of regional dialects and idioms....Because of

these obstacles, no reliable study of the Syrian experience in America exists, and the Syrians are rarely mentioned in general immigration or assimilation studies. (Naff 4)

Naff's rationalization of the lack of scholarship about the Arab American experience not only points to the failure of North American scholars to cover this lacuna in North American immigration history, but also points to the failure of the Arabs themselves to document their own experiences. She states:

They failed to develop a program of cultural preservation or to leave to their descendants a significant body of community-generated literature or private documents that would serve as primary resource material. Most notably lacking, in the thinly dispersed Syrian community, has been the absence of community unity or a common ethnic identity. (4-5)

The major issue for these early Arab immigrants was a need to achieve the financial goals for which they emigrated, rather than to document their experiences of crossing and resettlement. The fact that many of these immigrants were peddlers who were poorly educated and sometimes illiterate, even in their mother tongue, explains this lack. Furthermore, these newly landed immigrants were more concerned with their mother cultures and histories; "the history of the Arabs and their glorious civilization" mattered more than the immigration experience, which they felt was "too fleeting, too insignificant to warrant recording" (5). However, at the same time, these immigrants were trying their best to become a part of the new culture to which their children were born and raised. In the process, they began to lose much of their original identities, which were reflected in their beliefs, traditions, and even in their names. As the first generation of immigrants passed away, "few children retained appreciation for the relics and documents of a poorly understood past; except for certain sentimental items, most disposed of their parents'

cultural legacy” (5). Like immigrants from other parts of the world, they found themselves gradually assimilating into the North American lifestyle and culture.

Although the journey for both Arab immigrants to the United States and Canada is in some ways similar, at the same time, there are key differences between these two groups. In order to further understand these differences I have divided the discussion of Arab North American experience into Arab immigrants to the United States and Arab immigrants to Canada.

3.1 Arab Americans

“The Most Invisible of the Invisibles” is a phrase coined by Joanna Kadi²⁵ to define Arab-Americans in her book *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994). Kadi goes on to state that,

[a]s Arabs, like other people of color in this racist society, our race is simultaneously emphasized and ignored. For long periods of time no one can remember that Arabs even exist....Of course this forgetfulness changes once there is another “crisis” in the Middle East....We will feel the effects of the social construction of “the Arabs” that has cast us as enemy, other, fanatical terrorist, crazy Muslim. If we are women we can add to that list veiled Woman and exotic whore. (xvi)

While Kadi may have felt in the 1990s that Arab-Americans, who began to migrate noticeably to America in the late 1800s, were the least known ethnic group in the United States, the incidents of September 11, 2001 and the war in Iraq have made Americans much more aware of the “invisible” race among them. As the smoke of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon began to clear, it became known that the vicious attacks were executed by Arab Muslim extremists. Instead of fearing their lack of popularity, Arab-Americans became infamous overnight as the War on Terror commenced and they were placed under a microscope. Since then, off and on,

media interest in Arabs depends on the situation in the Middle East and recurring fear of terrorist attacks in the United States and other countries around the world. More recently, the incidents of the Arab Spring²⁶ that began on December 18, 2010, have meant that Arabs have been one of the main topics in newscasts and other media. The situations in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and currently Syria have all had their share in the media's spotlight as the people of these countries struggle to overturn corrupt governments and gain a form of freedom from dictators and extremists.

However, what remains problematic for many Arab American scholars, like Kadi, is the fact that the actual interest in Arabs is limited to just that: the public's fascination with what the media has to offer. Scholarship in the United States repeatedly overlooks the existence of the ethnic Arabs who have been a part of American society since the mid 1900s. A forerunner in scholarship on Arab American history and culture is Adele L. Younis, whose work discusses the arrival of the Arabs to the United States.²⁷ Younis's work is considered "[o]ne of the earliest and most thorough historical studies of Arab (mostly Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian) immigration to the United States" (Suleiman, *The Arab-American Experience* 145). Younis's research depends heavily on newspaper articles and references in memoirs and journals of travelers and explorers, which include excerpts from sources that begin about 450 years before Columbus (80).²⁸ She also states that "Arab influences on exploration are quite extensive" (80), even citing that their wisdom helped "pave the way for Columbus's voyage to the New World" (80). Younis even writes about Arabs occasionally caught in Africa during the slave trades and sold into slavery in the Americas. However, her work focuses on more distinct accounts of Arab migration to the United States, which began around the late 19th century around the time of the Homestead Act of 1862. According to Louise Houghton's survey *Syrians in the United States: Part I* (1911),

It appeared to be certain. . .that, although they cannot now be traced, certain Syrians, not traders but farmers, emigrated to the United States between 1870 and 1876. They pushed westward, took land, and became so merged in the growing community that it has become impossible to distinguish them from Americans. (484)

The inability to distinguish these Arab settlers from other ethnic groups becomes a key point in the study and research of earlier immigrants in the United States. One of the main concerns of these Arabs was acceptance by the majority and the need to assimilate into the population in order to settle. The concept of assimilation at this stage was easier for the newcomers: they were mainly (if not all) of the Christian faith; their names were in most cases Christian (from the Bible, i.e. John, Peter, Mary etc.) or easily changed to Western names; and finally the “anticipation of change was part of the emigrant’s tool of survival. It prepared them to face problems that might become wedged between themselves and the basic needs and goals of their families” (Naff 9). Therefore, the need to discard part of their Arab identity, which set them apart from the majority, became an obligation. An important point that Naff makes is that the early Arabs who travelled to the U.S. did not do so in order to flee from persecution, war or even natural disasters; their migration was a “deliberate and calculated choice” (83). They either had the financial means to move to the United States or family who would support them in their endeavor. Their journey was not necessarily about resettlement, but was based on a compelling need to enhance their financial status in their native countries. For many, their temporary relocation became a promise of a better future and lifestyle for themselves and family members, and they remained in the US.

While both Naff and Younis focus on the fact that Arab immigration to the United States was mainly dependent on calculated choices: financial, educational, and even at times

religious,²⁹ other writers like Gregory Orfalea³⁰ find that this migration depended heavily on the political changes that took place in the Arab world. All of the writers who have researched the immigration of Arabs to the United States have done so with a focus on why these Arab groups began to leave their countries. Orfalea claims that some of the reasons for the first wave of Arab migration to the United States occurred due to issues such as:

a growing population caused by the advent of better hygiene and scarcity of cultivable land—particularly in the Lebanon Mountains—[which] was an important factor, as well as periodic famines, insect blights and droughts that, among other things, wrecked the crucial sericulture, or silkworm production, that was a staple of the Lebanese economy in the 19th century. (51)

Along with these issues, the Ottoman state of Syria began to witness unrest among its own people. Incidents like the massacres of 1860 and the increased taxation laws of the ruling Ottoman Empire led to an urge to seek out better working and living opportunities in Western countries that promised liberation from instability and a chance for new beginnings.

However, Arab-American identity is complicated by the fact that American identification of Arabs differs from how these groups identified themselves. The early Arab immigrants were at times referred to as Turks, Ottomans, Ottoman citizens or subjects, Syrian, or Syrian-Lebanese. The “interchangeability of those terms,” claims the late Michael Suleiman, “reflects an absence of definite, precise, or enduring identity” (37). At the time, the concept of nationalism (Arab or otherwise) was still in its beginnings, as explained earlier, and therefore these new immigrants only affiliated themselves with their small villages or communities to which they were born and raised. The family unit for these immigrants was very important: Alixa Naff explains that the “paramount institution of Syrian culture, invested with profound emotional

significance, was the extended family. Ties of blood and affection, inculcated from early childhood, bound family both in work and leisure. Every member was dedicated to its welfare, honor and status” (69). The separation from the family and the values, which that connection reflected, would be tested greatly during the first migration of Arab-speaking peoples.

The immigrants who arrived before World War I differed from those who arrived at a later stage. The first wave of immigrants was made up mostly of uneducated refugees whose main goal was work to support families in their native countries. More importantly, the difficulty of adapting to the new culture and society in North America led some of these groups to go into further isolation. As Jacqueline and Ismael³¹ state in “The Arab Americans and the Middle East” (1976),

The cultural and linguistic factors of integration—of adapting to the social fabric of American life—were the major problems facing new immigrants; discrimination, racism and ethnic stratification have served to reinforce ethnic distinctions in second and third generation Americans even though they many have no manifest racial, cultural or linguistic differences that obviate assimilation. (390)

Thus these new immigrants found it difficult to be accepted, even though most of them were Christians and considered to be “white.” Furthermore, states Hassan,

The early immigrants’ emphasis on Americanization and integration, the drastic reduction of Arab immigration as a result of the 1924 National Origins Act, the prevalent hostility to foreigners, and the growing anti-Arab racism as a result of the political situation in the middle east, all combined to force Arab Americans underground. Belonging to a nonvisible and largely Christian minority classified as

white, many of them tried to pass [as Americans]. (xiii)

The problem of identity for these Arabs was based on the problem of acceptance. While these groups were granted a racial identity by the US government, as “whites” or “non-European whites,” they struggled “to negotiate that formal classification into a solid identity that would facilitate their acceptance by American society and in accord with their self image” (Elayyan 45). However, the concept of acceptance by American society was (and is) rooted heavily in the impression of Orientalism in Western perception. In Western perception, people of Eastern cultures have always been viewed as inferior to people in North American and European cultures. In *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said’s states: “On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things” (49). Orientals were, and are to some extent, perceived by Westerners as “static, frozen, fixed eternally. The very possibility of development, transformation, human movement—in the deepest sense of the word—is denied the Orient and the Oriental” (208). Paul Eid³² echoes Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism* in *Being Arab*:

[I]n the West, the Arab and Muslim categories convey a series of negative stereotypes that are integrated into a coherent and self-referential system of representations. Thus, in Western popular imagery, Arab/Muslim and Western “civilizations” are often perceived as being informed by two antithetical cultural systems, the former leading ineluctably to bigotry, tribalism, religious fanaticism, and cultural backwardness, and the latter to democracy, liberal ideas, and freedom. (xv)

In addition to the image of the desert Bedouin, which was, and still is, largely a part of the Arab image in the West, other images of Arabs range from Arab sheiks and oil moguls who are

surrounded by harem and belly dancers (Stockton 126) to Islamic fanatic terrorists who mistreat women, and are barbaric and blood thirsty (127).

Thus the issue for Arabs immigrating to the United States is no longer a problem of merely assimilating into American culture, as it was in the past; Arab immigrants were divided amongst themselves by how they identified themselves. In the past, Arab immigrants were either nativists, who held strongly to their native customs and values or Americanists, who were born and raised in the US and were influenced by the ““ideals represented by the stars and stripes”” (Halaby 56). However, Arab identity came to be influenced by the media and the general perception of stereotypes that, in turn, affected how Arab Americans’ identified themselves, as Jacqueline and Ismael claim:

Arabs, cast as villains of an international scope, find their lives—whether in American communities or in the Middle East—substantially compromised by the stereotype. American images of the Arabs affect the Arab peoples of the Middle East via the import of American Middle East policy; and affect Arab Americans in the daily rounds of their lives by producing public and personal recriminations against them for any new crisis, by holding up their cultural and religious heritage to public ridicule, and by placing in jeopardy the lives and fortunes of their kith and kin in homelands cherished in the deep sentiments of personal identity. (402)

As Said noted in his work on Orientalism, the fact remained for these Arab groups that they were viewed differently due to racial and cultural elements that set them apart from their surroundings. According to Said, Arabs (as Oriental others) and their language can only be properly studied and interpreted by orientalists because the former are incapable of interpreting themselves (Said 290). Muharram adds,

Said further argues that the orientalist believes that oriental writing is to be taken not in whole but as fragments, since the Orient cannot be known without his or her mediation. . . . [t]he orientalist believes that he or she is required to present or represent the Orient through a series of representative fragments, “fragments republished, explicated, annotated, and surrounded with still more fragments” (139-40).

Thus, according to the above discussion, even Arabs settled in North America were considered as the “other,” incapable of representing themselves or their people through their own writing. At the same time, it seems their experiences were not considered important enough to be narrated by the North Americans themselves. Therefore, the image of Arabs, and subsequently the concept of Arab North American identity, remains fragmented in Western thought.

However, the Arab community in the United States did not, earlier in the 20th century, set out to redefine itself in the eyes of the American people. Arab Americans remained somewhat docile, maybe due to the “reluctance to ‘stand out’ in a host society” (Orpahlea 213) or for fear of embodying the stereotypical traits assigned to them. Sunaina Maria adds that

Arab identity has historically been largely invisible and also racially ambiguous, falling between the cracks of the white/nonwhite binary and not officially recognized as an ethnic identity. Despite discourses of cultural pluralism and later multiculturalism, “Arab” identity has historically been difficult for Arab Americans to perform in the public sphere due to the repressive domestic policies targeting Arab Americans that accompanied U.S. overseas interventions and involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict, well before 2001. Some scholars suggest that this repression and broader anti-Arab racism led to a general cautiousness within Arab American

communities about publicly displaying Arab identity that dissolved, partially, in later generations and with the growth of pan-Arab nationalism in the 1960s. (326-7)

Nevertheless, after the Six-Day War of 1967³³ Arabs in the United States began a network of associations and organizations, which sought to raise awareness about the issues in the Middle East (Orfalea 215). Around this time, Arab American writers and artists began to reflect on their own experiences of immigration and resettlement, thus bringing to light Arab American literature as a part of the ethnic American literary scene.

3.2 Arab Canadians

Documentation on Arabs in Canada is sparse, to say the least. Even the existing research that has been done is very heavily dependent on the American experience and American sources to support such research. The research and surveys done on Arab immigration to Canada have mostly been written about Arabs in Canada post 9/11.³⁴ Nevertheless, one source that is repeatedly referred to is Baha Abu-Laban's book *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: The Arabs in Canada* (1980). Although his work is over 30 years old, the information that he provides sheds light on the Arab experience in Canada, which as an immigrant process seems to be very similar to that in the United States, with a major difference that will be discussed later in this section.

Abu-Laban, like the writers discussed earlier, begins his work by presenting the story of an individual Arab immigrant: "Almost a century ago, amid the numerous immigrants then pouring into Canada, a 19-year-old youth landed in Montreal. It was 1882 and Abraham Bounadere from Zahle, a small village in The Lebanon overlooking the fertile Beka' valley, had become Canada's first Arab immigrant" (1). The first Arab immigrants arrived with Turkish passports; they were

mainly Syrian-Lebanese and, to a lesser degree, Egyptian Arabs, who arrived in two significant migrations, the first migration between the years 1891-1911 and the second migration after the second World War beginning in 1951 (59). They settled mostly in urban areas, mostly cities like Montreal and Toronto. By 1911, there was an estimated seven thousand individuals of Arab origin, both of first and second generation, in Canada (Eid 3).

One of the main reasons for migration, especially for Syrian- Lebanese Arab Christians, according to Paul Eid, is the colonial penetration into the region during the 19th century, which led to the arrival of European missionaries and the establishment of Christian schools.

“[T]hrough emissaries in the region, colonial powers such as France and England set up schools that drew large numbers of Christian locals who, in the course of their education, were strongly influenced by Western ideas and culture” (5). In addition, as Christians, many of these minorities felt oppressed by the Muslim Ottoman rulers. As European powers began to anticipate the fall of the Ottoman Empire, they competed for the loyalties of the Arab Christian Syrian-Lebanese through supporting their individual churches, like the French support of the Maronite (a Christian minority) dream of a separate homeland in Lebanon (5). Although the rationale behind such incidents was mainly political, European powers were able to manipulate the relationship between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority; towards the end of the 19th century the “tradition of accommodation” between these two groups had been seriously disrupted, which led to the first wave of migrations of Arab Christians to Canada (6). However, as in the United States, these first immigrants struggled with their identities due to the lack of an affiliation with a home nation that supported their religious beliefs and cultural aspirations. Eid states that,

the ethnic consciousness of the newcomer was extremely feeble and fragmented since it was not rooted in the history of a nation-state that provided a unifying frame

of reference. This disinclination to maintain ethnic identity was compounded by the immigrants' strong religious and cultural affinities with Western culture.

Depending on sources like Abu Laban (1980), Kayal (1983), and Suleiman (1999), through his research Eid finds that Arab immigrants in Canada met with the same fate as those in the United States. The Syrian communities before WWI "underwent high rates of acculturation from one generation to the next, such that, following the first migratory wave" (6) they began to lose their native languages, abandoned their cultures, and intermarried, which only made it easier for them to assimilate into Canadian culture and tradition.

However, as the new waves of Arab immigrants began to migrate to Canada, mostly due to political unrest, such as revolutions, the establishment of the State of Israel and war, Arab identity³⁵ was stronger and more stable. These families held to their religious beliefs and cultural values and kept a connection to their native homelands. Nevertheless, it is this same stability that led to the ethnic discrimination of the Arab minority in Canada.

According to Raja G. Khouri,³⁶ "the greater part of the Arab Canadian community, while economically established, remains on the margins of mainstream society politically and culturally" (9). Although Khouri's study, which was conducted in 2003, echoes the work of other scholars on Arab North Americans, at the same time it reveals that the perception of multicultural tolerance in Canada was also (like the United States) heavily affected by the demonizing images of the Arabs in the media. The Canadian Arab Federation claims:

The stereotypes and racist overtones put forward by some mainstream media confirmed the permissibility of singling out Arabs for suspicious treatment: they are guilty by association, suspect by reason of their ethnicity and religion, therefore, an acceptable object of hate. Arab Canadians were left standing on their own, having to

explain themselves and prove their loyalty, defend their religion and demonstrate its virtues. At times they have even hidden their ethnicity and denied their heritage in a bid to escape scrutiny. (6)

However similar the experience in the U.S. and Canada may be for Arabs, there still exists a major difference between these two groups, which stems mainly from the fact that Arabs in America found themselves forced into assimilation for fear of being rejected by the majority, whereas Arabs in Canada seemed more adjusted to the multicultural aspect of the country. Their ethnicity, unique culture, and traditions, which rendered them as minorities, were not heavily threatened by the majority.

The purpose of Canadian multicultural policies was to “recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society” (Kamboureli 99). Nevertheless, Smaro Kamboureli argues that “treated as a sign of equality, ethnicity loses its differential role. Instead it becomes a condition of commonality: what ‘all Canadians’ have in common is ethnic differences” (100). Therefore, instead of promoting a sense of belonging and unity, for some immigrants, these same multicultural policies in Canada led to a more distinct sense of disunity and detachment from Canadian identity. Thus Arabs, like many other minorities, persisted in sustaining their Arab identity within their new home. Nouri Gana states:

. . . Arab Canadians, like other ethnic communities, often find themselves caught in the play of disjunctive temporalities, still harkening back to the pulsations of Arab cultural influences whose centers lie elsewhere, even while consciously propelled forward by the surrounding multiculturalist Canadian milieu. The challenge is to break out of the entrenched entelechy of ethnic double consciousness and dare into

the present, not only into everyday Arabness but also into everyday Canadianness.

(38)

Although Arabs in Canada have experienced some form of discrimination, according to the Canadian Arab Federation, at the same time, the majority of Arabs in Canada have experienced a form of connection to their new country. The duality of identities and the ability to relate to both Arab and Canadian culture, allows Arab Canadians an opportunity of expression that is rarely found by Arab Americans. The loyalty and connection that Arab Canadians maintain towards their homelands, through the preservation of traditions and language, also allows them to relate their experiences in their new home as they simultaneously realize their Canadian identities as well.

4. Arab North American Literature

The first noticeable Arab migrations to North America in the late 19th and early 20th century introduced the first Arab North American voices. These first migrating groups, as discussed above, were made of “young, single and adventurous men” (Naff 27), mostly uneducated men, and very few or no women. Due to the difficulty of adjusting to the new life, these immigrants established communities similar to those they had in their native countries as they tried to maintain their ethnicity and culture. Homesickness and a need to belong led them to write literature that “tended to be more nostalgic, romantic and transcendentalist/mystic in its beginnings” (Al-Issa 20). The literature that exists from this period was mainly written in Arabic and intended for the newly landed immigrants as its audience; it dealt with issues of immigration, cultural adjustment, and reflections on the progress and conditions of Arabs (mostly Syrians in the late 19th and early 20th century) in business, farming, and trade.³⁷

Eventually within these migrating groups from the Near East, a number of intellectuals and influential Arab writers began to surface, like Ameen Rihani (*The Book of Khalid* 1911 and *The Path of Vision* 1921) and Gibran Khalil Gibran (*The Prophet* 1923), who wrote both in English and in Arabic. These writers were able to portray their own culture and thus add to or contradict existing images constructed by others. While many other writers began to appear, many of them were unknown as being of Arab origins because of the name changes that took place during the immigration process.

However, the difficulty of discerning writers of Arab descent in North American literature was not the only obstacle for scholars of Arab North American literature. Wail Hassan writes that a large number of Arab writers who began to write as early as the beginning of the 20th century have gone unobserved. He follows by saying that the Arab American

tradition was rarely mentioned in the by-then thriving fields of ethnic American, minority and postcolonial studies, and outside the bounds of Arabic studies, which understandably focuses only on the vast field of literature written in the Arabic language. In other words, the whole tradition had simply fallen between the disciplinary cracks. And while the history of Arab immigration to the United States was well documented, the genesis of Arab American literature remained to be adequately charted. A few general overviews, studies of individual authors, and anthologies provided useful entry points into the subject, but no systematic account of the birth and development of a literature that was entering its second century had been attempted on any large scale. (“Arab-American Autobiography” xi)

Most of Arab-American literature has been obscured because much of it has been written in Arabic and translated into English, which rendered it impure English literature by some literary critical standards.

This lack of critical attention to Arab-American literature is also due to the inability of North American readers to identify with the themes or the experiences of the writers. The difference in cultural backgrounds and ideologies between Arabs and North Americans makes it difficult for scholars to address and critique these works. David Williams explains: “people read ‘ethnic’ literature with very limited ideas about what they will find there. What does not conform to their prejudices, support their theories, or serve as background material for an issue that interests them may be overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant” (11). Nevertheless, he goes on to state that “Arab-American writers are becoming visible today as never before” (11). Through their writings, Arab-American writers have related their experiences coming to the shores of America, as in Ameen Rihani’s (1876-1940) novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911), which tells of the Syrian immigrant experience (Orfalea, *Grape Leaves* 3). Other writers like Ethel Adnan (also written as Etel) (1925-), an American of Lebanese origin, has dedicated a large portion of her work to the Lebanese civil war, which lasted fifteen years from 1975 to 1990 (85). Through such literary works the writers not only describe certain incidents in the history of their native countries, but they also portray images of their journey to becoming American. These images are rich with Arab traditions and culture that these writers have managed to carry with them across the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of their new home in the United States.

Evelyn Shakir divides the Arab American literary tradition into three main periods. The first period (1900-1920s) consisted of writers like Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran (who were known as the Mahjar or Immigrant poets), and Abraham Mitrie Rihbany. The writers of the

first period “knew that addressing American readers required more than just the ability to write in a foreign language. They had to situate themselves in relation to a powerful discourse through which their readers had already formed their ideas about that distant culture” (Hassan *Immigrant Narratives* 41). However, these writers did not forsake their Arab heritage or language; they made literary contributions to both cultures (40). The second period, or the middle period (1930s-1960s), according to Shakir, saw comparatively few works and consisted of writers like Salom Rizik and George Hamid. According to both Shakir and Wail Hassan, other writers during this period, like Vance Bourjaily and William Blatty, who were second generation Arabs, did not identify themselves as being of Arab origin or were “highly conflicted about their heritage” (“Arab-American Autobiography” Hassan xiii). Jacqueline and Ismael make an important point concerning the concept of assimilation: they state, “While American society has approached the problem of integration of diverse cultural groups with an assimilationist perspective, the great melting pot has assumed the character of a heterogeneous mixture rather than a homogeneous solution of cultural plurality” (390). Therefore, the inability to belong to one group or the other became a struggle for such writers. They lived in and understood the North American culture, whereas their Arab heritage was something they had never experienced first hand. Wail Hassan adds to this discussion of first and second-generation immigrants by asserting that

Descendants of Arab immigrants are in a similar predicament to that of the children of immigrants from other parts of the world, who, growing up American or British [or Canadian], have various degrees of exposure to their parents’ culture and language. Immigrants bring with them their own cultural background and worldview, and their transition to the U.S. or Britain [or Canada] involves a

kind of negotiation and adjustment that is quite distinct from the cultural predicament of their children. (5)

The identity struggle for some of the Arab writers of this period, especially for second-generation Arabs, became less complicated than for those who came before them. The need to shed the second identity, the Arab identity, became a requirement in order to be accepted into the only culture they knew and remembered.

The third period began in the 1970s and consisted of a great number of poets, novelists, and playwrights, who either migrated after the 1952 and 1965 reforms or were born in North America. These writers maintained their Arab identities (“Arab-American Autobiography” Hassan xiii) because of a more firm sense of Arab nationalism and patriotism. Unlike the earlier immigrants to North America, these groups had witnessed revolutions that aimed to liberate their countries and their people from European occupation. Their connections to motherland were ingrained in a deeper understanding of loyalty to origin and language. Nevertheless, within this struggle to find a position in the North American literary canon, Arab North American writers have found a middle ground of self-representation. Wail Hassan explains this theory through Said’s concept of orientalism:

By writing in English, Arab immigrant writers have found themselves placed in that position, often expected to interpret their culture for their readers. However, they do not stand outside the “Orient,” like the European or American Orientalist, since they are of the “Orient” by virtue of their background; but they are also of the “Occident” by reason of immigration and acculturation. Therefore their position represents a merger of the two classic stances of the native informant and the foreign expert.

Many Arab immigrant writers have seen this position as a privileged one insofar as it

affords them a unique insiders perspective not only on the Arab world, but also on their adoptive country. (29)

Thus, Arab North American writers became more aware of the importance of containing their Arab heritage, as well as their American one, in literature that provided room to explore and develop both.

In Canada, the history of Arab North American literature is similar; however scholars such as Elizabeth Dahab state that Arab Canadian literature actually did not begin until the 1970s (*Voices in the Desert* 7). She claims that Arab writers began to migrate to Canada between 1963 and 1974 and settled in Quebec and Ontario respectively (8). According to her research, [roughly] 15% of Arabic-Canadian literature is produced in Arabic, while 60% of it is written in French, and 25% in English” (11). Dahab’s focus is mainly on Francophone literature written by Arab Canadians; however, she makes an important point: the first Arab Canadian writers wrote in French, rather than English. The first Arab immigrants settled in Quebec, especially in Montreal, whereas, immigrants who arrived later in after the mid 20th century were divided between Quebec and Ontario. Dahab’s research is one of the very few that deals with Arab Canadian literature and, although her scope is limited, she does provide insight into the beginnings and issues of these works. Dahab also presents an important and interesting argument concerning the identity of Arab Canadian literature, specifically that produced in Quebec:

The thorny part of Arabic, or by extension any minority literature produced in Quebec, is that it is conceived of as being produced by minorities twice removed from the dominant systems, namely the French and English Canadian literary institutions. The first degree of removal would be the political alienation in which Quebec itself, with its own French language, stands in relation to the rest of

Canada; a minority within a majority. The second degree of removal for the foreign-born writer would be precisely her foreignness, her hovering at the periphery of major systems, whether or not she writes in the language of the two Founding Nations. (Dahab *Voices in the Desert* 9)

Therefore, in order to find an audience in their host nation, Arab Canadian writers have to find the means to communicate their experiences through a borrowed tongue. Thus a sense of alienation occurs as the Arab North American writer is forced to express her/himself in an alternate language(s) to the one she/he grew up using.³⁸

The shortage of literary works by Arab Canadian writers is even greater than the gap of Arab American writers in the United States. According to Kamal A. Rostom, the editor of *Arab-Canadian Writing: Stories, Memoirs, and Reminiscences* (1989),³⁹

Maybe the Arab Canadians themselves are partly to blame for being neglected by scholars, historians, and others who surveyed and mapped the literary artistic landscape of Canada, because they did not seriously attempt to record, annotate, and disseminate their own artistic products and literary works, nor did they raise their voices and make themselves noticed when such studies were undertaken by others. (8)

However, other scholars, like Nouri Ghana, believe that there is no shortage of Arab Canadian literary culture, but a shortage of interest by scholars and critics in such works: “[t]he fact remains, ...that Arab Canadian artistic productions—however long-established, rich, or profuse they might be—did not help Arabs to override their minority status in Canada but became [like their authors] themselves variably hostage to such a minority status, paradoxically mirroring and warranting their ultimately mutual marginalization” (27). In both cases the fact remains that this

literature is “weakly institutionalized and largely unknown to mainstream scholarship” (Dahab *Voices of Exile* vii). Dahab states that there are “approximately forty Arabic-Canadian writers, of whom twenty-five have produced a major work (one or more books); the rest have a minor production (principally publications in reviews and magazines)” (*Voices of Exile* 11). Some Arab Canadian literature that has been recognized by scholars deals with issues of immigration and exile; their works reflect “extraterritoriality, in-betweenness, and estrangement” (Dahab *Voices of Exile* 31). These writers, who may have already been a part of a minority in their native countries have to re-negotiate their identities once again, as Canadians or even as Quebecois. Works by Arab Canadians began to be identified around 35 years ago; writers like Maim Kattan (*Le Reel et le theatral* 1970; French) and Saad Elkhadem (*Ajnihah min Rasas* 1971; Arabic). However, it was not until the 1980s that an actual movement of Arab Canadian literary culture began in different Canadian cities and in a diverse range of literary genres, with writers like Nadia Ghalem and Marwan Hassan (19, 20). However, even works that have been noticed by the Canadian public and have been awarded honours and translated into numerous languages like the movie *Incendies* (2010), which was adapted from Lebanese-Canadian Wajdi Mouawad’s play *Scorched* (2003), have not been taken into serious consideration by literary or film scholars. The problem that stems from such indifference to Arab Canadian works heavily affects the image of Arabs in Canada, which is itself heavily influenced by media, especially from the United States.

4.1. Arab North American Women’s Literature

Arab women migrated with their families to North America because of war, poverty, and famine; their perspectives on political, social and religious changes are an important part of understanding the experiences of this ethnic group. Their struggle lies in the necessity to discard

their identities in order to assimilate into the larger North American culture. They had to break away from the stereotype that painted the Arab woman as “a creature who follows her husband like a dark shadow remaining silent and obeying at all times” (Abdelrazek 1). They had to find a new identity that enabled them to relate to their new lives without losing the culture that they carried proudly from home. These women, through their interpretations of life between two cultures, offer important perspectives not only on their own ethnic society, but also on the role of ethnic women in North American society in general. The emergence of collections of writings like *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994), shed light on literary works by Arab American and Arab Canadian women writers whose identities do not fit neatly into pre-determined labels. Instead, these women writers reveal the difficulties of identification with their Arab societies and their North American ones, through discussions on gender, culture and race.

Arab women “[have] always represented a particularly contested terrain in relation to colonialism,” claims Somaya Sami Sabry: “[they] have been the space upon which many prejudices and preconceptions about the East have been mapped out” (3). They are either belly-dancing women enslaved and exploited by lust-thirsty men or they are images of oppressed, veiled women who are denied the liberties of life. Even attention to the works of women of Arab origins in the West is closely connected to the Westerners’ need to uncover these images of oppression and exploitation. Barbara Winkler explains:

The strong female presence is to be explained in the first instance through voyeuristic interest in the ‘oppression of women in Islam’ and clichéd notions about their plight; a controversial, if not surreptitiously exciting, topic, which obviously appeals to buyers. Accordingly, this literature is not seen as art but reviewed and received as a form of female self-assertion or a faithful depiction of

social reality. In publications whose titles play with catch phrases like ‘Shahrazad’ or ‘veil,’ their covers adorned with women wearing headscarves or yashmaks, Arab women writers are asked about their own personal experiences of ‘the restrictions placed on the life of an Arab woman’ and how they managed to emancipate themselves from these shackles through writing. How astonished we would be if German, French or Anglo-American woman writers were presented in this fashion, the aesthetic aspects of their work completely ignored. (361)

Arab women’s literary works will never gain respect and interest as literary works if they remain attached to the stereotypical images of Arabs and Arab women. I strongly agree with scholars and writers like Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh that the only way of breaking these redundant stereotypical images is through the critical presentation and discussion of the works of Arab North American women and the “necessity of granting Arab women’s texts the same level of literary nuance attributed to the work of western authors” (3). An important way to understand their unique experiences is through their expressions of self-representations that address their perspectives through literature, and more so through life writing.

In earlier literary works, Arab North American women’s writing was bound within the need to assimilate into North American culture, which led to a departure from the cultures and traditions of their homelands. Geoffrey Nash explains:

In the English texts a tension is built up as a result of the subject’s attraction to Western culture and the urge to identify with it and assimilate its codes. The borders of national cultures are thereby transgressed, but in traversing such boundaries the subject experiences profound cultural disorientation, in part due to the obstacles presented to assimilation by the host culture, and in part to the pull

exerted by her residual Arab identity. The predicament in which these Arab women find themselves in such circumstances is that of belonging to neither camp, or on reflection, of recognizing themselves as composed of hybrid or mixed identities. (160)

Through the years, Arab North American women's identities matured through an acceptance of their own diversity and they began to reflect their ability to adapt to a coexistence that allowed them to embrace their bi-cultural or even multicultural selves. Even with the acceptance of this duality of identity, however, there is still concern that they have to "oscillate between the Arab and American [or Canadian] cultures," notes Amal Talaat Abdelrazek. They are not fully accepted by North American society because it usually excludes them due to their ethnic background. At the same time, they no longer fully accept or identify with aspects of their Arab culture (Abdelrazek 11).

The struggle, therefore, becomes a struggle to situate the self within a space that allows these differences of culture, ethnicity and even memory to exist without erasing or denying others. In her introduction to *In the House of Silence*, Fadia Faqir states that

Writers of Autobiography within the Arab-Islamic culture of today have, to a varying degree, managed to reach an epistemological break with the past. Autobiography is written when the author steps beyond the conditions of his/her group, overcoming the obstacles of an angry family, indignant relatives and a prohibitive society. The writer 'announces [her] presence as an independent memory in an independent body' (15).

While Faqir's statement reflects the work of some Arab North American writers, Joumana Haddad's *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman* (2010) comes to mind; even Haddad's work cannot be independent of memory, nor is it written through an

“independent” self. Even the mere announcement of liberation from religion, culture, race means that at one point and time the individual was a part of a larger collective identity through society, family and a collective history. Finally, Golley points to the importance of Arab women’s autobiography in establishing a voice for these women in their native societies and in Western societies of which they have become a part. In addition, autobiographical writing for these women presents an insight into the complexity of their identities that reflect multi-layered affiliations, interests and cultures. Through their life writing, Arab North American women and, in extension, Iraqi North American women are able to display their unique selves by portraying their ability to contest the boundaries and limitations of borders and societies that try to eliminate one identity or the other.

Notes

¹ Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 20th century.

² An interesting point to add here is Edward Said's claim in his work *Orientalism* (1979), in which he states that "it has been estimated that around 60,000 books dealing with the Near Orient were written between 1800 and 1950" (204). Although this claim may seem to contradict Hitti's statement, at the same time it shows that even with the abundance of resources on the area and its people, Western readers were still ignorant about Arabs.

³ The word "Arab" has been repeatedly connected to the concept of nomadism and in some sources the word is used by the Arabs themselves to refer to nomads or Beduins. See Hitti *History of the Arabs* page 41 for the etymology of the word.

⁴ Many sources refer to these Arabs as Southern Arabs.

⁵ The full title of the work is *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Ibn Khaldun considered the book as a preface to his *Book of Lessons, Record of Beginnings and Events in the history of the Arabs and Berbers and their Powerful Contemporaries*.

⁶ Rejwan's approach to Arab identity and self-image are presented through a somewhat negative perspective of the Arabs in general. His research picks on the points and details that show them to be lacking in heritage, culture, and development. Even Rejwan's claim of Ibn Khaldun's great accomplishments of documenting Arab history falls short due to his comment, "it may not be entirely unjust to assume that much that is found in Ibn khaldun's work is probably not original, and that many of his seemingly original ideas may have been inspired by sources yet to be discovered" (2). I use Rejwan's work as a source to show the scope of works done on Arabs.

⁷ Rosenthal was one of the first to translate and annotate *The Introduction* in the 20th century. See Ibn Khaldun.

⁸ Kayyali's book was written in 2006; however she does not state the source or date of these figures.

⁹ In some sources spelled "Caliph."

¹⁰ This particular section in Hannibal Travis' book *Genocide in the Middle East* (2010) is contradictory to most of the images he presents on Islam and Muslims.

¹¹ Many historians, like John Bagot Glubb, point to the fact that the Arab empire's expansions were prominent during the Umayyad reign, a century before the Abbasid Caliphate.

¹² The Ottomans were Turkish Muslims, but they encouraged Arabic language expansion because the language of the Koran was Arabic.

¹³ For a more detailed discussion see also *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East 1915-2015* (2011) by Nayef R. F. Al-Rohan, Graeme P. Herd and Lisa Watanabe.

¹⁴ For more information on Arab Nationalism see *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (1938) by George Antonius and "Requiem for Arab Nationalism" (2003) by Adeed Dawisha.

¹⁵ This translation of the name "al-Iraq" is taken from the introduction of *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* by Simon and Tejirian. See Works Cited.

¹⁶ Iraq during the Ottoman Empire was divided into three provinces: Baghdad, Mosul, and Basrah.

¹⁷ Kanan Makiya is also known by his pseudonym Samir al-Khalil, under which he first wrote his work, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*. Makiya used this pseudo name out of fear for the safety of his family members in his home country of Iraq.

¹⁸ Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem twice; the first attack was in 597 BC and the second was in 586 BC.

¹⁹ See Abraham Leon *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* (1970).

²⁰ The disturbances referred to are most likely the Arab Revolt (1936-1939) in Palestine against the migration of Jews into the country.

²¹ See *The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait : Religion, Identity and Otherness in the Analysis of War and Conflict* (1999) by Hamdi A. Hassan. Hassan presents a number of views concerning the issue of the invasion.

²² Jamial's estimates are based on the records in 2006 when violence in Iraq was at its highest.

²³ Ali Al-Hadi and Hasan Al-Askari are the 10th and 11th Imams of the twelve Shiite Imams.

²⁴ Numerous texts concerning the history of Arab Americans have been produced since Naff's work was published in 1985. One of the latest works published on the topic is Hani J. Bawardi's *The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship* (May 2014).

²⁵ Joanna Kadi is now known as Joe Kadi.

²⁶ The Arab Spring refers to the civil uprisings and revolutions that began in the Arab countries, starting with Tunisia, against the ruling governments of those countries. The revolutions led to the ousting of rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen successively. A good source for further reading is *The Invisible Arab* (2011) by Marwan Bishara.

²⁷ The work was originally a Ph.D. dissertation submitted to Boston University (Suleiman *The Arab-American Experience* 144-45). The work was later edited by Philip M. Kayal and published under the same title in 1995.

²⁸ See also *The Arabs in America, 1492-1977: A Chronology and Fact Book* by Beverly Turner Mehdi (1978).

²⁹ All the writers referred to in this study consider the effects of visiting missionaries to the region.

³⁰ See also *The Arab Americans: A History* (2006) by Orfalea.

³¹ I realize that Jacqueline and Ismael's work is outdated, but their discussions provide an insight into the struggles that Arabs were facing in America long before the incidents of the Gulf Wars and 9/11.

³² The full title of Eid's book is *Being Arab: Ethnic and Religious Identity Building Among Second Generation Youth in Montreal*.

³³ The Six Day War was fought between Israel and Egypt, Syria and Jordan in June 1967.

³⁴ Studies on the Arab experience in Canada were aimed at uncovering some of the hostility that these people were facing in Canada as a result of the 9/11 incidents.

³⁵ Eid addresses the effects of Western culture and modernization on 20th century Arab identity in *Being Arab*.

³⁶ The study was originally commissioned by the Canadian Arab Federation in 2001-2002 (Khouri 6).

³⁷ See Michael W. Suleiman's *The Arab American Experience in the United States and Canada: A Classified, Annotated Bibliography* (2006).

³⁸ An important issue that should be discussed at this point is the fact that some Arabs from countries like Lebanon and Morocco have French already integrated into their local dialects. French is not only studied, but also used by a majority of the people of these countries. Further study on such issues should be made in order to understand the extent of actual alienation that such Arabs feel in expressing themselves through literature.

³⁹ Rostom's 72 page book contains a small collection of Arab writers from different parts of Canada.

Chapter Two

Fragmented Histories: Fragmented Selves

The potential to bleed, we all have it—
To explode in a market, soccer game
among friends, in lines waiting
for a job or news of the missing.
We carry our dead the way ants do,
dragging corpses with intensity and care.
There are many to bury
before the sun goes down. . . .

From our arak-soaked dreams some valium
cloudy mornings, we speak of leaving.
Measure the miles with pebbles, dropped teeth,
bones, burnt clothing, scarves.
Leave you to embed your limbs in our cars
streets, homes, when we have all
gone, shoulders pushing through doorways, exit
map in hand.

Alise Alousi, “What Every Driver Must Know” (2-3)

Longer than the distance from New York to Baghdad, this longing is
paralyzed somewhere between memory and the imagination and engulfed
in what could have been, but is no longer, and will never be.

Evelyn Alsultany, “Night of Longing for the Home Land” (32)

The truth is that displacement is not necessarily the single most important
factor defining diasporic identity; the truth is, too, that the disunity the self
experiences is not necessarily the direct result of that displacement alone;
finally, the truth is that longing for one’s ancestral country is no guarantee
that returning there will restore unity, for that place functions as an
allegory of values that are often commemorated while the historical and
social contingencies informing them are ignored.

Smaro Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies* (135)

The stories of war, oppression, and displacement for Iraqi North American women
reveal some of the experiences that Iraqis have gone through in the last fifty years. Unlike the
studies and statistics that political approaches and media coverage have provided, these works

shed light on the disruptions and hardships of the daily lives of these narrators or in the lives of their friends and relatives. The narratives reflect the fragmentation that their identities suffer as they try to survive devastation and violence. The main theme that threads through all of these works is loss: loss of home, of country, of loved ones and more importantly the loss of a unified identity. According to Stuart Hall, “the subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities” (Hall “The Question” 276-7). These women are forced to discard or alter their identities in order to fit into the molds that their societies, at home and later in their host countries, impose on them. The traumatic incidents combined with the sense of displacement exhibited in these life narratives reflect the fragmentation of selves that were once perceived as whole.

Iraqi North American women have to position themselves in different times and places in order to recollect and retell their stories. This subject positioning leads to further fragmentation as they try to recollect images of their former selves and former traumatic experiences. In the cases of Salbi and Balass the trauma of exile fragments their understanding of their own identities and how these identities are situated within their home culture. For Mikhail, in the first part of her memoir, even the process of writing these memories is fragmented, as the poet tries to piece together her memories in disconnected outbreaks of narrative poetry, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Fragmentation in Nadir’s memoir is a result of her inability to reconnect with her Iraqi self, which is represented in her connection to relatives in her father’s native country. Suzette A. Henke establishes that autobiographical texts have at “least three subject- positions;” she lists these positions as follows:

first the authorial consciousness, or subject of enunciation, narrating the autobiographical story in a series of recollected, sometimes discontinuous episodes; second, the early, fragmented (and often traumatized) version of the self; and finally the ostensibly coherent subject of utterance evinced through the process of narrative disclosure. (xv)

In the four works chosen for this study, these Iraqi North American women reflect all three of these subject positions in their life narratives. Through these subject positions, these women relate their stories that are, at times, non-sequential as they move from incident to incident trying to construct a picture of their personal and cultural pasts. However, before they are able to reach the third position, these women display the magnitude of fragmentation that has occurred in their lives due to trauma and displacement. This fragmentation becomes evident as they try to recollect the memories of experiences in their native country, or, as in Nadir's case, incidents they never actually experienced literally, through their life narrations.

Fragmentation of identity in Iraqi North American women's narratives is caused by the experiences of traumatic events and mental and physical displacement. Throughout these works, the experience of trauma and displacement overlap repeatedly because trauma for these women is always followed by a sense of loss of the ability to identify with their Iraqi selves. Trauma has been defined as a "wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. . . . the wound of the mind. . . is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly"¹ (Caruth *Unclaimed Experiences* 3-4). The trauma that Iraqi North American women relate in their texts is trauma that is experienced emotionally, psychologically, and physically. More importantly, quoting Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, MacCurdy states that,

Trauma is an event that shatters belief systems about life, beliefs that help us all operate in the world—the assumption that the self is sufficiently competent to act, that people are generally good, that the world has meaning and is predictable. Trauma breaches the unspoken contract we think we have with life, that if we do what we are supposed to do we will survive. (16)

In the life narratives of Balass, Mikhail, Salbi, and even Nadir, the belief systems upon which they have lived their lives are not only shattered, they are replaced by fragmented images of that same system. Thus, they are unable to return to that state of belief, even after the traumatic influence has disappeared from their lives. The safety, the pride, and the sense of belonging that was once felt in the home and the home country become obsolete in their memories because all the agents that reinforced these feelings are gone.

Trauma in these works results from a number of issues, such as war, separation from loved ones, and displacement that creates an additional base of struggle for the autobiographical self as it tries to understand, define, and reconstruct these life experiences.

Laurie Vickroy suggests:

Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, disassociation, resistance, and repression, among others.

(3)

Therefore, in addition to the new identity that these women create in order to cope with their new lives in the West, they are also creating an identity that is capable of narrating the

traumatic experience. Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy states in *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma* (2007), that the “person who experienced the trauma and the person writing about it are not one and the same. Writing requires a construction of persona--and a point of view--that is different from that of the protagonist” (2). MacCurdy’s statement can also be applied to oral narration, as in the situation of Valentine Balass. For these life narrators a separation between the past self and the narrating self is the only way that they can fully confront their past traumas and renegotiate their identities as active agents, rather than as passive victims.

These women’s traumatic experiences are very personal; their narrations portray particular details and incidents that are specifically unique. For each of these women, narrating trauma allows her to further understand her experience and her identity, which has been fragmented since the traumatic events took place. However, their works also present a historical document of some of the experiences that the Iraqi people endured in times of war and instability. The experience of trauma in each of the works chosen for this study is displayed differently and each one of these narrators has experienced trauma in different moments of Iraqi history. Grace states that “[w]riters [and in this case narrators] take on the role of witness bearers and documenters of their own traumatic experience as well as the wider socio-political implications of that historical moment to the community” (71). Thus their narrations, on one hand, present a personal narrative, while on the other they present a communal narrative in which the history of a nation and a people is brought to light. The sense of a collective trauma is also reflected in the sense of collective memory, which is present in all four of the works; these women try to present and reflect the experiences of their fellow citizens in Iraq. Ron Eyerman explains that collective memory “unifies the group through time

and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it. . . .” (161). In the narratives of Balass, Salbi, Mikhail, and Nadir, the memories of trauma are not all solely theirs. They reflect upon the experiences of family members, friends, neighbors, and even people they do not personally know. They experience a sense of trauma as Iraqis, even when they are spatially distant from the traumatic incidents. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (2002) explain: “The term ‘trauma’ describes the experience of both victims—those who have suffered directly—and those who suffer with them, or through them, or for them, if only by reading about them” (2). Their life narratives explore the traumatic incidents that affected a nation during times of war and unrest, in addition to their isolated, personal incidents. Within these personal accounts, trauma is addressed as a collective memory of a people.

As addressed earlier in this chapter, the fragmentation that these women experience is connected strongly to their sense of loss of safety and belonging in their native country, Iraq. However, even before the issues of war or revolution become threatening factors as they begin to feel displaced in their homes and among family and friends. Said writes that “[b]orders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons” (“Reflections on Exile” 185). For Valentine, Salbi, and Mikhail there is a gradual sense of being displaced from family and community while still in their native country. Displacement in the homeland happens for two reasons: either these women chose to isolate themselves from society or they are isolated by society. Fear of oppression, a sense of injustice, and abandonment are some of the reasons that lead these women to isolation. For instance, Salbi feels incapable of belonging to the community of friends that surrounds her. Later in the work, she also relates her sense of abandonment by her family after she is forced into exile. Mikhail’s

displacement takes place due to the threat of government officials and the impact of war on her life and the lives of her family and friends. Balass's displacement takes place because she becomes an outcast in her own neighborhood during the anti-Jewish movements in Baghdad. These issues of displacement in the homeland will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

Migrant identities are expanded to accommodate such alterations as these women are forced to add memories and experiences to what has already been established in their countries of origin. For Iraqi women in the diaspora, the issue of identity is already loaded with diversity due to the multiple frames of identity to which these women belong. Thus religious affiliations, multiple cultural histories, and the experiences that are obtained during the journey of Iraqi migrants all add to the complexity of the concept of identity for these women. As stated in the "Introduction" of this study, Iraqi women are diverse according to several factors: where they were raised in Iraq; (urban, rural, small town); their social status; the different social structure differs in each region; their religion; (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sabian, Yazidi); and their educational backgrounds. As diasporic subjects, these women's identities attain further multiplicity. After the first Gulf War and during the sanctions, many Iraqi families fled to neighboring Arab countries like Jordan, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Although the cultures in Middle Eastern countries may be similar; the similarity lies in the majority's language and religion; however social traditions and experiences vary, in some cases extremely, from one country to the next. Iraqi women in the diaspora are thus forced to adapt to these cultures in order to subsist and succeed in their new surroundings. Agnew states that "the individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between living 'here' and remembering 'there,' between memories of places of origin and entanglements with places of

residence, and between the metaphorical and physical home” (4). At the same time “[d]iasporas can denote a transnational sense of self and community and create an understanding of ethnicity and ethnic bonds that transcends the borders and boundaries of nation states” (4). Furthermore, for many Iraqis migration to other regions within Iraq or to neighboring Arab countries was not the final one; their final destinations lay in European and North American nations, an issue that only added to the multiplicity of identities and associations. For scholars like Brubaker and Cooper, this multiplicity makes the individual’s identity “weak,” as they relate: “Weak or soft conceptions of identity are routinely packaged with standard qualifiers indicating that identity is multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated, and so on” (11). An important point to add in the case of Iraqi women in the diaspora, is that foreign culture for Iraqi women is not only represented by Western culture, but also by the diverse cultures within Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. The movement from Baghdad, which is, in comparison to the smaller cities in Iraq, known for educational, technological, and cultural development, to rural areas and smaller cities, requires Iraqi women to undergo a number of cultural and social changes. For instance, migration to the North of Iraq, Kurdistan, requires adaptation to a very different culture and language.²

Diasporic Fragmentation

In order to understand why these women are considered part of a diaspora, it seems logical to understand how diaspora is defined. In 1991, William Safran defined diaspora as follows:

The concept of diaspora [can] be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: (1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more

‘peripheral’ or foreign regions; (2) they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history and achievements; (3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; (4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; (5) they believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and (6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (83)

All four of the Iraqi North American women in this study reflect these aspects of diaspora. Their narrations all, even Nadir’s, show their attachment to the homeland, even if the homeland at one point and time was challenging to belong to. In another definition, Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk (2005) state that the “classical form of diaspora . . . relates to forced movement, exile and a consequent sense of loss derived from an inability to return” (10). But Bill Ashcroft counters both of these definitions by stating:

Indeed, according to prevalent definitions of diaspora, one of its characteristic conditions is that of absence and loss, of alienation and not-at-homeness. Yet clearly this experience of exile and loss does not adequately describe the experience of all diasporic subjects, nor of any subject all the time. Nor does it accommodate the most pronounced feature of global culture—the rapidly

increasing ability to travel back and forth between ‘homes’. Thus the concept of diaspora has been a constant source of argument, and a rapidly changing phenomenon, for the last thirty-five years. (75)

Ashcroft’s discussion is also relevant when approaching the texts by these four Iraqi North American women. While they were all, at a point and time, driven out of their home country, for some there have been forms of return either to Iraq or to the bordering countries in which their families and friends remain. Nevertheless, the return is not as satisfying or as ideal as the memories that these women retain of their native country because after years of sanctions, wars, and political unrest, the country they once belonged to has also experienced profound change.

For Iraqi women the situation since the first Gulf War has worsened, as the sanctions and wars fragmented the normalcy of life. The first victims were the women and children. Al-Ali and Pratt write:

For Iraqi women’s worsening circumstances we find multiple culprits in discriminatory policies, oppressive practices, and violence. Much of the debate and literature about the occupation reduces to polarized political positions. . . . Iraqi women are exposed to discriminatory practices as well as violence from a range of sources—political parties, militarized groups, and the occupation forces. (*What Kind of Liberation?* 2-3)

The country that they left, even in its worst situations, was not as unstable as it is today. Thus, the inability to return is accompanied by the sense of loss of a position within a country that was once accepting of women’s development and progress academically, professionally, and socially. Through their narratives, Mikhail, Valentine, and Salbi, and even Nadir try to

introduce to the Western reader the images of life as Iraqi women caught in the middle of political revolutions, instability, and wars. What critics and scholars seem to forget is that

[i]t is the women who have had to carry the brunt of the horrendous inflictions orchestrated by the Iraqi state, the US government, various militias and armed forces. As they mourn the loss of their sons, husbands, and fathers, they have had to tend to their sick and wounded, while laboring both at home and outside to provide for the family. (Al-Adeeb 143)

While their lives are greatly fragmented by these experiences, at the same time this sense of fragmentation is even more distinct after these women leave their homeland, as their attachment to the past, no matter how desperate, or the mother country creates a threat of fragmentation that “is posed by the mourning over losses inherent in immigration,” as Salman Akhtar notes (78). As the migrant women try to re-establish themselves in the new country, they sense a “growing discontinuity of identity the more serious the break with the newcomer[s’] continuity of [their] identity, the greater [their] yearning for those lost love objects (abandoned culture) which in the past provided a comfortable sense of continuity” (Garza-Guerrero qtd. in Akhtar 78). The struggle with the changes of culture and traditions leads to the fragmentation of the self that is split between the memories of home and the need to re-establish the self in the new country.

Iraqi women in the diaspora are forced to take on new roles and additional characteristics that enable them to survive in the new environments of North America. Adapting to the new culture can be seen as a form of “doubleness” (47) as Samir Dayal terms it. He explains:

Doubleness is more productively conceived as the interstitiality of entering (or leaving) and destabilizing the border zones of cultures, as fracturings of the subject that resist falsely comforting identifications and reifications. Its negative value is that it denies the subject's sovereignty and stresses the performativity of the subject. (48)

Dayal conceives “doubleness negatively, [in order] to explode the positive and equilibristic constructions of diaspora around the desire for belonging ideally to two or more places or cultures” (47). Iraqi women in the diaspora, like other migrants, are incapable of erasing past memories, even when they create new ones in the new country because “‘doubleness’ is often laced with nostalgia, filial piety, and credulity. It is hardly a space within which a salutary rhetoric of suspicion about official narratives of nation, or about race, gender, sexuality, or class can flourish” (47). Thus identity is fragmented into a past identity that is affiliated with the past culture and a current identity that tries to assimilate into the culture of the host country, which ultimately leads to complications of self-representation.

In 2008, Nadia Lewis conducted a study of migrant Iraqi women in Canada titled: “Iraqi Women, Identity, and Islam in Toronto: Reflections on a New Diaspora” in which she approaches the complications that Iraqi women immigrants face in coming to Canada. Through her interviews with these women, she noticed that “in the case of ‘exile diasporas’ or new immigrant groups that have fled violence or political persecution in the homeland, the point of ‘origin’ is key to their construction of identity in the host country” (144). The problem for these women lies in the fact that the “imagined homeland is at once a source of comfort and pain, refusing to allow the immigrant to form meaningful ties with the host country for the initial period of migration” (Lewis 139). The connections to the “lost country” become even

greater when the migrant is unable to adjust and adapt to the host country due to language, cultural, and religious barriers. Akhtar maintains that the main obstacle in the process of migration is the sudden change from a predictable environment to “a strange and unpredictable one” (5). Furthermore, the memories of the migrant become selective as the subject chooses the moments of the past that she wants to remember; memories of the motherland are thus limited to happy ones that reflect family gatherings and outings or peaceful times between wars. In her interviews with migrant Iraqi women, Nadia Lewis also noticed the presence of “the experiences of loss and longing for home, which intermingled with their discussion of the fracturing of their extended families. Their nostalgia for the past clearly coloured not only the ways in which they discussed their relationship to the Iraqi nation, but also the means by which they re-constructed the image of ‘home’” (135-6). Although the traumatic events are the reason that the migrant has chosen to leave the native country, these same events become isolated incidents in her memory. Naficy adds that “[t]he shock, disruption, or loss accompanying exile, together with the distance from the home’s mundane realities, can invite the project of restoring the ‘original’ home, the original state of being. Idealization often goes with mourning” (*Home* 19). On the other hand, the sense of displacement in the new country is connected to feelings of deep loss of a tight-knit family life and memories of a safe childhood within a community and a culture that is easily related to, unlike the community and culture of the host country.

While people in the diaspora may struggle with acceptance and alienation in the new country, the sense of exile presents a more painful reality that is not overcome with the ability to assimilate in North American culture. Naficy explains:

Exile suggests a painful or punitive banishment from one’s homeland. Though it

can be either voluntary or involuntary, internal or external, exile generally implies a fact of trauma, an imminent danger, usually political, that makes the home no longer habitable. . . . [and] to be away from the homeland is to be always homeless. (*Home* 31)

For narrators like Valentine Balass, the return to Iraq is almost impossible; therefore as Edward Said notes, “exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. . . . Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as a part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (*Reflections* 177). Thus, their need to adapt and resituate the self within the host country becomes a vital issue on the road to re-establishing themselves. The process of adaptation itself becomes another factor of fragmentation. The following discussions address the different manifestations of fragmentation in each of the life narrations chosen for this study.

**“You don’t want to show off that you are Jewish”: The Homeland as a Prison
in *Baghdad Twist***

Baghdad Twist, an NFB³ documentary film written and directed by Joe Balass, sheds light on the Iraqi Jewish experience in general, with a focus on his mother’s experience specifically. The fragmented images of the original home and, to a much lesser extent, the host nation portray fragmented memories of certain spaces and past times that are no longer within the protagonist’s reach. Earlier documentaries concerning Iraqi Jews, like *Forget Baghdad* (Samir 2002) also dealt with the Jewish diaspora from Iraq, but focused on their migrations to Israel and the effects of that movement on their sense of nationality and Iraqi identity as Arabs

in Israel. *Forget Baghdad* also focuses mostly on Jewish Iraqi male writers and their perspectives on their deportation from Baghdad, without any substantial attention to the experiences of women during this era in Iraqi history (out of four or five authors, Ellah Shohat was the only woman portrayed). *Baghdad Twist*, on the other hand, moves from the political to the personal as Valentine Balass (See fig.1) narrates her experiences as a Jewish Iraqi wife and mother in those challenging times; her stories reveal the social lifestyles of young Iraqi women in general and emphasize her sense of Iraqiness.



Fig. 1. Scene from Joe Balass, *Baghdad Twist* 2007. <http://www.nfb.ca/film/baghdad_twist/>

The documentary is visual in the sense that it highly depends on the family pictures, home video clips, archival footage, and even British documentaries that focus on the progressive lifestyle of young Iraqi women during the mid 20th century. The film is divided into two contradictory images of life in Iraq: the first highlights Joe Balass's mother's privileged lifestyle in Iraq and the abundance of family and friends. In an interview, Joe Balass states: "I wanted to make a film which contrasts with the present-day images we see of Iraq. I don't want people to think of Iraq only in terms of bombs and destruction. I want people to also think of beauty and of dancing the twist in Baghdad. I want people to think of hope" (Esra'a).

The photographs and videos portrayed in these sections of the documentary show people dancing and attending weddings in large gatherings. The images reflect a happy and relaxed atmosphere, in which the protagonist is a part of a large community of friends and family.

However, the film also portrays the very dark incidents of Farhood,⁴ in which the lives of Iraqi Jews were threatened and their gradual forced exile from Iraq. While the personal pictures and videos portray the lifestyle of the Balass family, at the same time they also relate the historical political issues that led to their escape from Iraq.

Loss, Fear, and the Fragmented Self

While the threat of British colonialism in mid-twentieth century Iraq was, in some ways, a part of the past, at the same time, the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the political complications that followed greatly affected the situation of Iraqi Jews.⁵ Thus, documentaries, like *Baghdad Twist* and *Forget Baghdad*, became a venue for Iraqi Jews to present their own perspectives on these historical incidents, without the highly politicized propaganda that showed a united Jewish front that supported an Israeli state in the centre of the Arab World. In “The Cinema of Displacement: Gender, Nation, and Diaspora” (2006), Ella Shohat states that

in the face of Eurocentric historicizing, the Third World and its diasporas in the First World have rewritten their own histories, taken control of their own images, and spoken in their own voices, reclaiming and re-accentuating colonialism and its ramifications in the present, in a vast project of re-mapping and re-naming. (70)

People living in the diaspora realize the need to re-identify themselves with their pasts and their families’ pasts by retelling their histories through narratives that allow them to dictate

their own versions of their stories. Balass's documentary allows Valentine to contest the Iraqi government's accusations that she betrayed and abandoned her love and loyalty for her country merely because she was Jewish. As an Iraqi, Valentine saw that it was only normal to stay in the country in which she was born and raised, even after Jews began to be expatriated from their native home. Her connection to Iraq is not merely a connection to a place, but to a history and an identity. The viewer hears Valentine assert her identity when Joe asks her, "Did you ever question the fact that you were Iraqi?" and she persistently replies, "No, I did not. I was Iraqi and that was it. I was Iraqi, I was a Jewish Iraqi. [in Arabic] The two always went together. I am Iraqi, I am Jewish. That is how it was" (Balass). According to Valentine, her identity is non-negotiable; she eliminates any doubt of her Iraqiness by repeatedly asserting her Iraqi identity to her son and the viewers. At the time, the sense that her own perception of her Iraqi self is forcefully and repeatedly threatened to be taken away by the Iraqi government, her former friends, and neighbors, leaves her in a state of limbo, unable to identify who she actually is and where she belongs.

The loss of her homeland is, in itself, traumatic for Valentine and the repetition replays how she identifies herself, even after forty years of exile. Valentine repeatedly identifies herself as if she is still trying to defend and renegotiate her Iraqi status with those who denied her this status almost half a century ago. Valentine never refers to herself as an Iraqi-Canadian nor does she flee to Israel, like other Jews in Iraq at the time; other Jews surrendered their Iraqi citizenship to escape persecution. Although the Balass family eventually migrates to the north of Iraq due to constant harassment, they do so secretly. Their decision to escape undetected reflects their sense of fear, but it also reflects their unwillingness to leave the country openly as traitors, as many other Jews were portrayed by the Iraqi government. Their secret departure

allows them to flee to safety without the prerequisite of giving up their Iraqi citizenship, thus maintaining their Iraqi identity.

Nevertheless, Valentine's sense of loneliness and exclusion are evident as she narrates the gradual shrinking of the Jewish community:

Joe: How many Jews were in Baghdad at the time?

Valentine: There were about 180, 000 Jews in Iraq. . .but we started not to be comfortable, lets say, after the 1950s. You tried to keep a low profile, like you don't want to show off that you are Jewish.

Joe: In 1950 what happened?

Valentine: Well you have to go back to 1948. Because in 1948 Israel was established and at that time of course they were against the Jews. They closed everything. *And the majority gave up their nationality and went to Israel* [italics mine].

Joe: How many Jews were left at that point and time?

Valentine: We weren't very many Jews left, probably about 10, 12 thousand.

(Balass)

Gradually, Valentine and her immediate family are one of the only families left in Baghdad to face the oppression and persecution by the Iraqi government. By retelling the story of separation from her family, friends, and most of the Jewish community, Valentine also tells the story of the fragmentation of her identity as a member of the Iraqi Jewish community. Not only is her community being fragmented by the newly placed regulations against her people, but her own identity gradually becomes fragmented as she is separated from her loved ones. When the conditions turn dangerous, her choice to stay in Iraq reflects her insistence to

prove to herself and to other (non Jewish) Iraqis that she is connected to her identity as an Iraqi Jewish woman. She narrates:

Papa was leaving anyway. My father was leaving with my mother because Uncle Morris was in Canada already, and they did leave in 1957. They told me: “How are you going to stay alone?” You know I just got married, I didn’t think about it. (Balass)

Although the separation from loved ones began to fragment her daily life, at the time Valentine does not understand that she has already begun to experience the collective trauma of her community. Her desire to stay in Baghdad only adds to the struggles that she is already facing with other Iraqi Jews, like the loss of friends, family, and a way of life.

The work sheds light not only on the personal experiences of the Balass family members, it also serves to portray some of the historical and cultural aspects of Iraqi life at the time. Hirsch and Smith suggest that

[c]ultural memory . . . can best be understood at the juncture where the individual and the social come together, where the person is called on to illustrate the social formation in its heterogeneity and complexity. The individual story, whether told through oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony, or performance, also serves as a challenge and a countermemory to official hegemonic history. (7)

As a part of this historical testimony, Valentine embodies the position of witness to the atrocities committed against the Jews at the time. Valentine describes the execution of two Jewish men as being “the worst part” (*Baghdad Twist*) of the conditions they were living at the

time. She narrates:

One day, actually that was the worst part, your brothers, Charlie and Ralph, went to school; all of a sudden I hear their voices. It was 9:30 in the morning. I said what happened? They said the school closed and there were Jews who were hanged. We run down to the t.v., we were all crying and frozen to death. There were thousands of them, dancing and singing because they hanged those people.

One [of the Jews] had two kids, two little kids, I knew them very well. (Balass)

Her personal fear and loss are connected to the fear and loss sensed by the Jewish Iraqi community as a whole. The separation and exclusion that Valentine and her family felt emotionally becomes a dangerous reality that they have to deal with or else perish like those men on the television screen.

Trauma for Valentine begins with the Arab-Israeli Six Day War of 1967. Up to this point in her narration, Valentine dismisses the need to leave Baghdad. Even with the political and social changes, the images that Balass presents of his relatives dancing, attending weddings and gatherings show a settled and calm society. He asks his mother about these images: “And so it was a relatively calm, peaceful time?” to which she replies, “Yes, it was before, see that was in 1965. . . You see all this was before the 67 War” (Balass). Joe states his confusion about the situation that his parents were in during these difficult times in Baghdad, stating that he is unable to comprehend how people were able to live normal lives with the violence that was shown towards the Jews in Iraq. His mother explains, in both Arabic and English that, “every year or two, when it’s calm people forget and live their own lives. If someone has a fear of something, there’s a revolution, a month, two months, three months

passes, everything is back to normal and everybody lives their own life” (Balass). However, Valentine’s strong connection to her country and to her people changes drastically with the 1967 War. She relates:

But after 1967 everything collapsed, everything. People we used to laugh with, sit with, they did not want to show themselves as though they know a Jewish person, as though they were friends with Jewish people. They started to hate us because Israel was winning the war and the government broadcast on the radio “watch your neighbor, if they are Jews. Watch what they are doing, watch if they are spies and in fact, even if you had a good neighbor, he was suspecting you were a spy. So, you can imagine in what state we were. Scared to death, not moving. A week later they cut all our phone lines. (Balass)

The sense of being imprisoned in her own home affects the way she perceives her own identity as an Iraqi. She, like other Jews, was made to feel unwelcome by the government, and in turn by their own neighbors and friends of different faiths. Gradually, the lack of safety of home and nation threatens their lifestyle, which leads once again to a sense of fragmentation. In addition, she is made to feel like a traitor by other Iraqis:

Joe: Why didn’t you try to leave at that point?

Valentine: We couldn’t, Joe you should realize one thing. It was forbidden for a Jew living in Baghdad to get out of the circle of Baghdad, out, no way. So where are we to go? (Balass)

The situation in Baghdad becomes very intense for the Jewish community who are trapped in their city and in their homes. The only way to cross the Iraqi border was by handing in their Iraqi citizenship. Valentine’s desperation is not only out of fear, but also out of a sense that she

is unwanted and hunted down by the people who were, at one point, her friends and neighbors. She is fragmented by the loss of a sense of security and belonging, which are taken away abruptly due to reasons beyond the protagonist's power.

Valentine's voice reveals the extent of the traumatic event, even after about 40 years; the alteration in the volume and the pitch of her voice is clear to the viewer, as she seems to relive the incidents once again. "On Thursday," Valentine continues, "they came ringing the house, two police cars. We were all asleep. It was quarter to 6 in the morning. I knew they were coming to get your father, I knew that" (Balass). The fear and confusion in her testimony become even greater as she relates, "They told me, 'Don't worry, it's only for a few questions. Ten minutes and we'll send him back.' I started screaming, and you know I was screaming at the top of my lungs. They said he shipped money to Israel. But you tell me, how do you prove someone is innocent?" (Balass). The viewer does not see Valentine's expressions, but her sense of anguish is clear through her voice. Her narration of waiting for hours under the hot sun in order to meet with the police and arrange her husband's release is accompanied with the images of shadows of people lined up and the sound of police sirens in the background; they help construct a scene for the viewer to better understand the situation. The family pictures that were shown earlier are substituted with a photo of Valentine enclosing her son in her arms, her face serious and despondent. Thus both her voice and the images presented by Joe Balass help recreate the anguish of the situation felt, not only by Valentine, but by the community as well.

The visual element in the documentary is an important issue to discuss at this point. While the family photographs in the beginning of the documentary, like other documentary photographs, may represent "the cohesion of the family and [are] an instrument of its togetherness; [the photographs] both [chronicle] family rituals and [constitute] a prime

objective of those rituals” (Hirsch 7). Nevertheless, towards the end of the work Valentine’s narration, along with the pictures portrayed, reveal the instability of life in her native country. The traumatic events that change the Balass family life are reflected in the way that the video clips and photographs become fragmented and focused on the images of immobility shown in the way Joe’s father’s feet are positioned on the ground unable to move forward (See fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Scene from Joe Balass, *Baghdad Twist* 2007. <http://www.nfb.ca/film/baghdad_twist/>

Not only is Valentine’s life fragmented by the trauma of her husband’s incarceration, but her role as a women, as a mother, and as a housewife are also fragmented, as she is forced to leave the safety of her home and go to negotiate her husband’s release. She narrates, “Every single day, I tried, I stood in the burning sun for hours. I had to go find a way to get your father out of prison” (Balass). Furthermore, by going to the police herself, Valentine is seen as defiant because she takes on a man’s role and breaks the image of Iraqi women’s social conduct. She relates this difficult time to her son:

While talking, I get emotional, I cry. I didn't care. They told me, you are a woman, why do you come? Why don't you send a man? I said I can't send a man, who am I to send? Whoever I send, you will put in prison. You don't understand, it was a terrifying moment, I was scared. You think I am doing all of this, I am scared to death. (Balass)

Her feminine self is threatened and, in some ways, fragmented because she is no longer the housewife, the mother, and the daughter. Valentine has changed positions with the men in her life; instead of being protected by them, she becomes their protector. However, in that intimidating society, she is still not strong enough to confidently face her husband's prosecutors.

As Valentine continues, her voice becomes anxious and her fear is perceptible as she states, "I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know what is going to happen to me, I don't know what's going to happen to your dad and I don't know what is going to happen to my children. I don't know how to protect my children." Anne Whitehead makes an interesting point concerning repetition in trauma fiction, which may be applied to Valentine's dialogue. Whitehead states that repetition "mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests an insistent return of the event" (86). Whitehead also adds that "in its negative aspect, repetition replays the past as if it was fully present and remains caught within trauma's paralysing [sic] influence" (86). Accordingly, Valentine's sense of powerlessness resurfaces as she seems to relive the trauma and even her speech changes from the past tense to the present tense. She not only relives the fear of her husband's imprisonment, but she also relives the fear of her inability, as a mother, to protect her children. The effects of the traumatic incident still form a threat to her and her sense of safety for herself and her family.

Valentine's husband, according to her narrative, was imprisoned three times and released on bail, which made him an easy target for persecution. The sense of being displaced from home, community, and country leave Valentine desperate for change that will ensure her and her family's safety. Her persistence to remain Iraqi, within the borders of Iraq is finally shattered by her fear for the lives of her loved ones. Therefore she decides that they have to leave the country. She relates to her son: "I told your father, let's go to the North and find a way. There is no other way. Three times in prison, I don't know what the next prison will be. Maybe it will be the end." Throughout the documentary, Valentine narrates the continuous loss of family, a lifestyle, safety, and freedom. Thus, her sense of fragmented identity and displacement is established while she is still in her native country, but this displacement becomes tangible when she leaves her home and city. She narrates the hasty and highly secretive escape by saying, "We left the house. You should see it. It's like someone is still living there; the beds, the furniture, the table, the food in the fridge, everything" (Balass). The focus of the pictures and scenes during Valentine's narration of her family's escape are on stagnant, lifeless objects, contradicting the former lively images of joyous gatherings, dancing, and celebration (see fig. 3). The physical appearance of the home remains, like the pictures that Joe presents, intact in her mind. According to Mohanty and Martin, the relationship between the self and home and community is crucial because the "the giving up of home will necessarily mean the giving up of self and vice versa" (qtd. in Wiley and Barnes xvii).



Fig. 3. Scene from Joe Balass, *Baghdad Twist* 2007. <http://www.nfb.ca/film/baghdad_twist/>

Therefore, the last connections that Valentine has with her Iraqi self are detached. “The relationship between self and place is an interactive one and changing one; the politics of where we locate ourselves is an integral factor in the construction of female identity and subjectivity” (Wiley and Barnes xvii). The loss of home is also a loss of self, the self that is safe and connected to the memories that her home presents.

The final step towards complete displacement, however, is after her arrival in Canada. Valentine’s first memories of Canada are connected to its drastically different weather in comparison to Iraq. She states, “That year they had snow like they didn’t have in 40, 50 years” (Balass). The video images show a Canadian city’s streets covered in heavy layers of snow; the streets are very different from the crowded streets of her hometown, Baghdad. The way she narrates her memories of Baghdad, is passionate and whimsical, even in her narration of fear and anxiety, unlike the narration of her new home in Canada. The snow and all it symbolizes—exile, cold, loneliness, and otherness—becomes the one of the first images of the documentary.

The fact that Joe Balass begins with this particular section of his mother's dialogue is interesting because it reflects his portrayal of what exile meant to his family. The concept of exile, argues Susanna Egan, "implies an originary home that is no longer accessible, a place of belonging to which there can be no return. Where exile may involve continuous wandering, or, at least, a sense of rootlessness, home is permanent in the imagination ... lost but unchanging" (97). The images of the Canadian streets, airports, and baggage belts all show the indefinite journey and destination for his family after they left their home country. On the other hand, Valentine's narrative presents memories of everyday life that show a fond attachment to home and family, which will never be replaced or re-established.

"I buried those boxes deep in my brain": Fear and Trauma in Zainab Salbi's Memoir

In *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam*, Zainab Salbi narrates her story about life in Iraq as the daughter of the private pilot of former, notorious Iraqi president Saddam Hussein during the 1980s. Salbi tries, through her memoir, to reverse the image of the spoiled, privileged girl that may have been formed by Iraqis or even Americans who knew about her father's connection to Hussein and the elite life she led. She writes early in her memoir:

When I was growing up in Iraq, people used to refer to me as the "pilot's daughter." I hated that term. I still do. It stole from me my very identity, everything I wanted to be. It defined me in terms of my father and him, in turn, by his most infamous passenger; a despot millions of Iraqis feared. (4)

Salbi's memoir tries to portray the difficulty of living under such fear and control, the inability to make personal choices and to speak or act freely. Her identity is already decided for her, even before she is mature enough to begin constructing it.

As the daughter of an elite Iraqi family, Salbi does not face traumatic issues of war like the death of loved ones; the men in her family were spared going to war. Even though most of her memoir is set during the long eight-year war between Iraq and Iran, her reference to the topic is very slight. At one point in the text, she explains about others who were forced to enlist: "Hundreds of thousands of families. . . would lose their sons; our family would lose none" (122). The traumatic incidents in her life, however, are more concerned with being merged into Hussein's world and lifestyle due to her father's position. Salbi bravely uncovers the personal details of her own family's conflicting struggles with fear of and loyalty to Hussein. Her persistence in identifying Hussein as *Amo* (Uncle) throughout the memoir shows her own struggle with her contradictory feelings and connections to Hussein. In the beginning of the memoir, she narrates,

Every instinct in me—survival, loyalty, anger, horror, resentment, guilt, and most of all fear—conspires to prevent me from speaking Saddam Hussein's name out loud. The fact that I use his name now, acknowledge a personal connection to him at all, is for me a watershed no matter how trivial that might seem. He wasn't related to me or my family by blood, but some of my childhood and virtually all of my teenage weekends were merged with his nonetheless. I was taught to call him *Amo* and he treated me like a niece. Though it disturbs me, I can still reach back and conjure up a few fond

memories of him. I would convict him of crimes against humanity without a second thought, but not because he singled me out for unkindness. (3)

The impact of Hussein on her family and on her life follows them throughout their lives, even after he is no longer in contact with them. Salbi's confessions about her and her family's relationship to Hussein is indecisive; she is incapable of speaking about him objectively, but at the same time she is unable to admit her connection to him as a close family friend. There is a sense of loyalty in her narrative as she states her ability to recall "fond memories of him" in spite of her fear of him.

From a very young age, Salbi becomes witness to the injustice that people around her suffer due to his powerful, and, at times, fatal actions. At the age of nine,⁶ along with the rest of the country, Salbi watches with her mother as men on television are "grabbed and taken away" from a Ba'ath Party meeting (18) to face execution as traitors of their country. At the time, Salbi does not comprehend the depth of the actions taken against these men, but the incident seems to shake her sense of safety and stability even in her own home. She recalls:

I felt fear stream out of that small television screen and chill our kitchen, where until that moment I had always felt safe. I remember the look exactly on my mother's face. I remember her eyes growing very round and fixing hard on the screen. I had never seen that look on her face ever before, but I recognized it anyway: it was horror. (18)

Through seeing her mother's expressions, Salbi senses fear and loss. The narrative at this point seems to be written from a child's point of view. There is a strong sense of confusion, fear of the unknown, and a somewhat instinctive reaction to her mother's horror of the scene unfolding on the television screen. Furthermore, the loss becomes more personal when Zainab

is told that one of the men taken that day is the father of her school friend. She is immediately forbidden to socialize with her friend. Gradually, she witnesses her friend being avoided by teachers and students alike; and finally her friend stops attending school. At her young age, Zainab realizes the traumatic experience that her friend endures, but she is unable to help her or change her situation.

While her family tries desperately to conceal some of the atrocities committed by Hussein, Zainab is exposed to many of the stories that her friends and colleagues relate to her. But she confesses,

I never witnessed what he did to people. I never had to put together the body of one of my family members like a puzzle after it had been hacked apart. I never had to spend years going from prison to prison in hope of finding alive a son who had been snatched away from our dinner table by the Mukhabarat [trans. Secret Intelligence] (117).

Her knowledge concerning these other families heightens her struggle between accepting and refusing her position as one of the “lucky ones” (117), as she sarcastically defines herself. At one point in her memoir, she narrates an incident related to her secretly by a Kurdish college friend:

She told me what she had heard, and pictures flashed across my mind of Kurdish families fallen in narrow streets, children heaped on one another, babies without breath, in their mothers’ dead arms, a whole village of people inhaling gas so poisonous they died *while they were moving*. A father found dead with his children around the kitchen table, killed in the middle of a meal, *as they*

were eating. I heard her describe these awful things, and yet I couldn't respond.

(147)

Salbi's silence shows both the magnitude of fear she felt discussing Hussein's crimes and the magnitude of the trauma in her mind as she tried to envision the catastrophe that had happened to a village of innocent, unexpected people. The incident that Salbi relates took place on the 16th of March 1988 when "Iraq dropped bombs containing mustard gas, Sarin and Tabun on the Kurdish city of Halabja" (BBC) in the north of Iraq. The BBC reports: "Estimates of the number of civilians killed range from 3,200 to 5,000, with many survivors suffering long-term health problems" (BBC). As a young woman, these tragic incidents resonate within Salbi's own perception of Hussein and her relationship to him. She seems to feel that she becomes an extension to his actions because she is unable to deter them or protest them verbally, even in the privacy of her own room.

Many of the traumatic incidents that Salbi faces are with her family; her parents' presence in the memoir is strong, especially her mother's presence. An important component of the memoir is her mother's diary, which is included in sections at the end of each chapter under the simple title "From Alia's Notebook." The excerpts and memories of her mother begin and end Zainab's memoir. Her mother relates the family's effort to escape Hussein: "We weren't excited about his friendship. We did not accept his invitations many times and managed to be away from him for two years while he befriended other families we knew, but we couldn't avoid him forever" (19). The pages from Alia's notebook tell the Salbis' stories with Hussein even before he became president; they reveal the personal details about his life and his character, but they also give Zainab a picture of the dynamics of the relationship between him and the Salbi family. Alia wrote these sections in her diary for Zainab when the latter was at

the age of 29; they helped her understand the decisions that her family made with regards to her own destiny. Both mother and daughter give the impression that their lives were greatly restricted; Zainab relates:

There was nothing natural about our “family gatherings.” We remained perfectly still, actors in a scene that I understood even then was about the ideal family Amo had never had growing up poor in rural Tikrit. . . . Even my little brother, who was always so full of energy, knew better than to squirm or interrupt when we were with him. . . .we were highly aware that anything we did wrong, even a wrong inflection, a hint of anything *ayeb* [trans. socially inappropriate], would reflect on our parents. (80)

Even as a child, Zainab and her siblings are afraid for the safety of their parents, as she recalls, “[b]oth of them looked nervous and helpless to me” (81). The restrictions and the sense of fear that was instilled in her family from Hussein control even the way they think about him.

Zainab even goes on to state that the only person she could talk to concerning Hussein was her mother, and even then, they were highly aware of their surroundings. At one point Alia tells her daughter, “You have to be careful honey. The walls have ears. . . . If you really need to say anything sensitive, it is best to go to the garden” (86). Zainab’s fear of Hussein is similar to the fear from a higher being or a god, who can hear and see all. At one point, she states, “*Thinking* was dangerous, so I learned not to think or form an opinion” (119). The relationship between her parents and Hussein was the first and strongest impact that leads to her fragmented identity.

The inability to act, dress, or even think as a separate individual creates within her a set of separate selves that help her manage with the lifestyle she is forced to live. She explains that she taught herself to hide her thoughts in a box when she was unable to cope with the horrific

stories she heard about Hussein. Her fear, however, is not due to the stories themselves, but to her inability to hide her feelings from Hussein's keen perception. She writes:

Each time a horror story came in, I put it in a box and locked that box away in my brain—I could almost hear the sound the box made when it clicked closed. The good “Amo” things stayed in the front of my brain; I needed access to those. The bad “Saddam Hussein” things I buried in those boxes deep in the back of my brain behind a wall so thick Amo couldn't see through it. (118-9)

Not only does she split her identity into two separate ones—one that affectionately identifies and accepts Hussein as Amo (uncle) and one that denies any relation to him and calls him officially Saddam Hussein—but she also separates Hussein into two different beings in her mind.

Her sense of disconnection is not only with Hussein, but also with the community that surrounds him. Zainab is limited in choosing her own friends and acquaintances, which in turn limits her closeness and connection with others. Most of the girls and, later, young women with whom she socializes are from the social circles surrounding Hussein and his family. Her relationship with others in these circles was limited to general conversations about television shows and fashion, in order to avoid any topics that might be considered too dangerous or inappropriate. Most of the memoir reflects her sense of displacement within this society during forced gatherings at the farmhouse⁷ where she spent “dozens, perhaps hundreds of weekends” (77) feeling imprisoned.

Her desire to escape this society leads her to fall in love with a man who was less than her socially and financially. After their engagement, the experience proves to be a failure. The young man's negative attitude towards her education, lifestyle, and obsessiveness lead her to

break off the engagement. She admits to herself and the reader that her desperation to escape from “Amo” only ends in her falling into “the arms of another” (159) captor. At this point, Zainab feels even more isolated from society. The failed love affair and engagement lead her to believe that she is incapable of living a normal life in which she can express and exchange thoughts and feelings with a person outside her family circle.

However, she is convinced by her mother to marry traditionally. Alia’s own inability to escape Iraq and Hussein drives her to arrange for her daughter to marry a family acquaintance in the United States. Unable to live a ‘free’ and ‘normal’ life in Iraq, Zainab decides to follow her mother’s instructions and travel to America. However, even though she seems to accept the idea, at the same time, she cannot get over the fact that she is forced to leave home, family and country in order to feel the freedom that she had longed for all her life. She writes, “I was a backseat passenger on my way from an Iraqi past to an American future” (172). She has no control over the life changing decisions that have been made for her by her mother.

Her mother’s decision proves to be damaging to her daughter, as the man Salbi marries turns out to be abusive both verbally and physically. Fakhri, her husband, ridicules her constantly and refuses to give her an allowance over twenty dollars a week to cover her and her home’s expenses: “I felt poor and vulnerable and utterly dependent on him, both financially and emotionally. . . . I began to feel I had escaped prison in Iraq only to wind up in solitary confinement in Chicago” (179). Her life in the States is different on so many levels from her life of luxury at home, partly because of the cultural differences, but more so because of her husband’s ill treatment.

Her husband’s verbal abuse becomes physical when she refuses to have sex with him and he rapes her. She narrates the incident:

He screamed at me and threw me down on the bed. Then he flipped me over onto my stomach and forced my head into the pillow. He held my head down and started penetrating me from behind , hurting me as he had never hurt me before. “Fuck you,” he cursed, again and again. I cried into the pillowcase until my voice disappeared. I couldn’t breath, and I was afraid I was going to die of suffocation. I vividly remember how powerless I felt. Finally I consciously stopped resisting and took my soul away, leaving my body an empty shell for him to abuse so he only had the illusion of power over me. In some painful far away place, I counted each second until he finished. Then he got up, put on his clothes, and walked away as if I was a piece of dirt he was leaving behind. (184-85)

Salbi’s rape fragments her in a number of ways and she is forced to disconnect from her self in order to suffer the trauma of being raped by a man she had only known for three months. The incident makes her aware of her weakness and of the fact that she is alone in a country far from family and loved ones. Her sense of displacement becomes double-fold as she mentally displaces herself from the reality of her marriage in a country that is thousands of miles from her home and family.

This displacement leads her to contemplate her experiences with men and she realizes that, up to this point in her life, she is incapable of finding and sharing the emotions of mutual love and respect with a man, which traumatizes her even more. She states, “[b]oth of the men I had become involved with had promised to love and care for me, and I had trusted them. But they both had hidden agendas. Neither was what appeared at first. Both were hypocrites who had lied to me to trap me and control me” (186). What is more problematic for Salbi is the fact

that she does not have a male figure in her life on whom to base her expectations of men. The only two other men in her life, she states, are Hussein and her father. She describes them respectively as being controlling and abusive to “millions of people” (186), while the other was “a loving man, but whose wife felt so caged in that she tried to kill herself” (186). Her concept of what a man should be is already fragmented by the two models of men she has in her life. Salbi finds herself broken and alone, without any connection to Iraq.

Coinciding with her personal trauma, her native country is thrust into war as Desert Storm begins to erupt in the Middle East. Salbi loses all contacts with her family and is left to live and make decisions for herself, something she was never allowed to do before. The fragmentation that Salbi suffers from trauma and displacement during the few months after her first marriage leads her towards a separation from her past self that, in turn, ultimately leads to the establishment of her newly constructed and individual self.

“ Thus our lives pass away/ like ripples in the water”: War and Displacement in Dunya

Mikhail’s *A Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*

The theme of fragmentation in Mikhail’s memoir seems to be contained in a statement she writes in the “Author’s Preface”: “In the first part, I could not say everything I remembered. In the second part, I could not remember everything I wanted to say” (vii). In the first part of her memoir, Mikhail is bound by the fear of Iraqi Intelligence police. Her poetry is scattered and, in some instances, it seems to be a collection of incomplete thoughts. For instance, she writes these two lines: “The neighborhood children knock on the night’s door/ In search of a candle” (30) followed by “And the pawns, shoeless and dreamless,/ retreat from the chessboard” (30). The lines are in a section of fragmented one-lined stanzas that seem to

address totally different themes; however the lines are framed within the broader theme of the Iraqi people's experience of war and sanctions. Mikhail points to the fact that those most affected by the sanctions are those with the least power: in this case, children and those living in poverty. The lack of electricity, jobs, and education for the Iraqi people became some of the major issues during the sanctions. The lines reflect this sense of fragmentation felt by the Iraqi people and by the poet herself. Caruth theorizes that, "if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (Whitehead 6). For Mikhail this step away from the linear sequence of incidents, time, and place is reflected in the form of her writing; the memories are fragments of dreams, nightmares, historical incidents, and actual personal memories.

Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea (originally published in Arabic in 1995) is "a non-chronological diary....[that] represents fragments of what occurred, what was dreamt and what was recalled" (Ghazoul 1-2) during the first Gulf War and the sanctions that followed. The exiled poet was born in Baghdad in 1965, a time of political turmoil in Iraq, and was witness to two of the three wars in Iraq, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the first Gulf War (1991). For Mikhail displacement began when she was forced to leave her country after increasing "systematic harassments from the [Iraqi] regime" (Simawe, *The War* vii). Mikhail recounts her experience:

I left Iraq in 1995, right after the publication of my "Diary of a Wave outside the Sea" [sic]. It was a text full of symbols and was critical of both the Iraqi regime and the allied forces. There were times before 1995 when I thought of escaping, but never did. The need did not seem that urgent yet. (Mikhail, Personal interview)

The writer speaks about the restrictions that poets face in Arab countries, “Arab leaders have been always aware that Arabic poetry has a great influence on the opinions of people; therefore, they, especially dictators, pay big awards and money to the poets who glorify them or glorify their deeds, and punish or kill those who criticize them” (Mikhail, Personal interview). Mikhail grew up in constant fear of the governing regime under the leadership of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath Party, which in the words of Simawe:

waged to trounce the smallest pockets of popular resistance, [thus the poet’s]
imagination was saturated with horror stories of imprisonment, torture, death,
disappearances, massacres, and rape; she was surrounded by uprootedness and
endless wars. (*The War* ix)

Mikhail was only fifteen at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war and she spent the next eight years under the sudden air raids of Iranian fighter jets and unpredictable bombings. Like other Iraqis, the relief she felt at the end of the eight-year war was short lived as Iraq plunged into another war, this time with the United States, after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1991. The writer fled to Jordan and was able to travel to the United States in 1996, where she “earned a hyphen to [her] identity and became Iraqi- American” (Mikhail, Personal interview) in 2007 when she was granted American citizenship.

Similar to the Balass family’s escape, Dunya Mikahil, in *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, has to leave the country covertly due to the imminent threat on her life. She leaves her belongings in her room, in her father’s house, and takes only her writings. She recalls:

Like a haiku poem

my suitcase reduced the world into

pictures

and letters

a notebook

a pencil.

[.]

Thirty years of my life.

I could lift in it and cross the threshold with it

as I had innumerable times

coming in or going out

to school or work or the souq [Trans: markets]. (61)

Thirty years of her life are condensed into a suitcase that carries only the items that represent her personally. She has no attachments to the place, her room, her home, or even her country. By the time she leaves Iraq, she has already been displaced from it. As she continues her departure she tells her readers of what she is leaving behind; all the other things in her room remain in place, as if she has no need for these material things to remind her of her history. She continues:

The table stayed as it was

covered with paper notes and

telephone numbers, layers

of magazines and newspapers,

and the letter opener I never had the patience to use—.(61)

But even the items she chooses to leave behind, reflect certain memories of childhood and teenage years:

I left Kasparov on the wall playing chess.

He didn't know he was the knight of my dreams

when I was a teenager. (61)

Mikhail's need to leave the country becomes, at that moment, greater than her love for the home in which she was born and raised. In addition to the loss of the country itself, in these situations of diaspora and exile, there is a loss of admiration and connection to the native home due to the amount of strain that is placed on the relationship between the subject and the native home. She examines her thoughts as she leaves;

As I left I knew I was forgetting something:

it bothered me to leave it behind

but I was determined not to look back,

like Orpheus leaving the underworld.

I would not look back at such a city:

Beautiful and ugly

lovely and hateful

strong and fragile

hot and cold, cruel and tender

intimate and indifferent.

I left with that one condition: to not look back. (61-2)

Although the relationship with her country changes throughout the work, the difficulty of living as and being an Iraqi is what is prevalent during her departure from her homeland.

Although she does not seem to debate her departure, even with herself, contradicting images of Baghdad show a love-hate relationship that she has with the city. Freedom is finally realized at the border between Iraq and Jordan, but even that freedom needs to be explained and haggled over until the authorities bestow it:

The way I left the country was like everything in Iraq:

Too hard, too easy, and exactly as they liked.

[.]

“What are all these papers?” the policemen at the Trebil⁸ checkpoint asked.

I was nervous and afraid that he might take even a scrap

from the suitcase. I told him

I was attending a poetry conference.

You know how poets talk so much at conferences

and need so much paper. He let me go free,

there, between Baghdad and Amman.

It was always a relief to be set free by an Iraqi policeman. (62, 63)

Until that point of departure, Mikhail is anxious for her freedom; her only concern is the fear of losing her poems and writings, which seems to be more than her fear of losing her country. The writings themselves come to represent the country that she imagined and wrote about, rather than the actual country she is about to leave. This section of the memoir reflects a sense of despair that those images of “a country” that she has created in the “papers” will be taken away from her, and thus leaving her without a country both physically and symbolically.

However, once Mikhail is outside Iraq, she begins to realize that she misses her country. She writes:

Outside Iraq, I often dream of returning home.

Sometimes I am regretful, or frustrated,
or afraid of being trapped.

Sometimes I am eager
to surprise my friends with my return.

Other dreams I can't remember. (111)

Her dreams and longings for home are fragmented by the fear she felt; her emotions towards her country are mixed and as time passes even these dreams of home are difficult to remember because the images are no longer easy to recall or relate to.

But the sense of displacement in the host country does not equal the sense of displacement that Mikhail felt while she was in her native country. The displacement that she felt in Iraq is accompanied by a sense of fear and entrapment. At one point in the text, Mikhail relates a traumatic incident that leaves her feeling lost and alone. She recalls, “I wandered

around the parking lot, unable to find my car. / I couldn't remember where I had parked" (110). The incident takes place in the "Sahat Al-Ihtifalat theater" or the "Courtyard of Celebrations" (109) in Baghdad. Journalists are "invited" to attend the compulsory meeting that is rumored to be hosted by the president's eldest son Uday. However, when Mikhail arrives with the rest of the journalists she waits for hours for the host to arrive. On the stage waiting along with the crowd are two men; she writes:

On the stage in front of us,
two men sat silently. One was the editor-in-chief
of Al-Qadissya and the other was the editor-in-chief
of Al-Jumhuriya—two local newspapers
run by the government (though all newspapers
in Iraq were run by the government). (109)

The host never arrives; instead he sends a messenger who lectures the audience about their loyalty to the nation. But the incident takes a dramatic turn:

Then someone in the front row
threw garbage at the two editors, and two armed men appeared
and escorted the editors away
leaving the red, elegant stage empty
and us with our anonymous, silent cowardice. (109)

This moment in Mikhail's life and in her memoir reflects a sudden sense of fragmentation that occurs with the humiliation of colleagues and men respected by their communities. Although Mikhail does not state their fates, the understanding is that the outcome is fatal. The sense of fear that surrounds her, as well as the other writers, is the fear of the inability to control the

situation or change it. Bound by fear the audience remains silent, unable to protest or express resistance to the incident taking place in front of them. The manner that the government used to threaten and silence the rest of the crowd leaves them susceptible to the same fate, as Mikhail states: “I watched the faces disperse—/ yellow faces, sprouting the horns of sheep” (110). Like sheep that are herded and prepared for sacrifice, Mikhail and her colleagues are warned to not step outside the limits set by the government. Thus, Mikhail seems to separate from herself as she tries to comprehend the incident, while at the same time trying to stay distant so her feelings of fear are not reflected in her face. Her sense of fragmentation in this incident is accompanied by a strong sense of displacement, not only reflected in her feelings of loss, but as she states, “I was in a false exile/ and I longed to be in a real one” (110).

The trauma of oppression is also accompanied by the trauma of war in Mikhail’s poetry as the effects of war become personal with the death of her friend Hassan at the front. Mazin, who was her fiancé at the time, relates his friend’s death to her: ““ He was scattered in the air right in front of me. / They rolled his corpse in an Iraqi flag / and took it to his parents in Zakho””⁹ (76). Hassan becomes the symbol for the Iraqi martyrs who fought for their country, only to be returned in pieces to their families. For Mikhail, the wars are a never ending subject in her work. Miriam Cooke claims that “[w]ar is experienced in scattered fragments” (“Arab Women” 148); for Mikhail, the images of war always appear and reappear throughout the work; she refers to them repeatedly from different places and different times in her life. Even after she arrives in the United States and settles with Mazin and her daughter, the war and its aftermath creeps into their lives after the second Gulf War. This time, the destruction has reached one of her family members as Mazin’s niece is kidnapped. She writes:

She is twenty years old.

Masked men surrounded her and pulled her away
from her mother's outstretched hands
into a car. They were like a tsunami.
Iraq is tsunami in slow motion.
I wake at night and wonder if she is alive
and if she is what her life is like.
To be in a cage of strange hands
Can only be a nightmare. (123)

Mikhail likens her homeland to a disaster that is inescapable, even when she is in another country. While she does not know the fate of her niece she has to live with the image of her taken and trapped by unknown men, far from her mother's arms. The trauma for Mikhail is not only the loss of her friend or even the loss of her niece, it is also the loss of an image of the country she once loved.

“This is not my recollection”: Fragmented Identity in *The Orange Trees of Baghdad*

In her memoir *The Orange Trees of Baghdad: In Search of my lost Family: A Memoir*, Leilah Nadir narrates the memoirs of her Iraqi father and his family. Leilah also reflects her sense of personal fragmentation that stems from her bicultural identity and her inability to connect to her father's culture. Additionally, Nadir's experiences of trauma and displacement differ from the other texts in this study because she does not experience these issues first hand. Leilah remembers through what Marianne Hirsch terms “postmemory.” The term that Hirsch uses to define the traumatic experiences of second-generation Holocaust survivors can also be applied to Nadir's experience of her family's traumatic experiences of war. Hirsch explains this

term as that which “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated” (Hirsch 22). Narratives that are related by her father and other family members surround Nadir and help her construct an idea of the home that her father left so long ago.

Her trauma, although is not first person trauma, influences her own perception of her identity as an Iraqi. Nadir’s paternal connection to Iraq is, by some standards, faint. Nevertheless, Leilah’s need to understand these stories herself, and, later, write about them in her memoir shows an attachment to her family and, in turn, to her Iraqi identity. Her memoir not only addresses her paternal family’s history, but it also allows her to retell her family’s experiences of war as a secondary witness to the war in Iraq. LaCapra argues that the “secondary witness. . . should reactivate and transmit not trauma, but an unsettlement. . . that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim” (267). Leilah’s experience of the war is second-hand but it affects her understanding of the situation, which her family is thrust into by the American invasion. Trauma impacts not only the lives of the victims who have undergone the trauma, but also their family members and acquaintances.

For Leilah Nadir, identity is a major issue because she is the daughter of an Iraqi father and a British mother. While the effects of her father’s Iraqi culture on her identity have been insignificant, on the other hand she has been immersed in the Western cultures of England and Canada. She even identifies her younger self as a “typical English schoolgirl” (20). Her father never attempts to teach her his native language, nor does he take his family to visit his native country. Leilah embraces her father’s love for his country through her eagerness and attachment to the stories of the past that her relates to her. However, Nadir’s point of view has

already been influenced by her British culture and surroundings. The memories she relates through her father's accounts and stories about his past, his country, and his family are done so from a Westernized identity. Even as she narrates the story of her parents' relationship, she reveals that her father was Westernized and thus more acceptable and accessible, unlike the images of the East that were popular at the time. Mary, Leilah's mother, "knew Ibrahim's family was Westernized," according to her account, but her interest in Ibrahim, at the time, seems to stem from the fact that he is, as an Arab, exoticized by Western culture. Leilah asks her mother about Ibrahim's foreign accent and her mother replies:

"Oh yes, he did [have a foreign accent]. A lovely one," she laughed. "And he was very exotic. The film *Lawrence of Arabia* came out around that time, I can't remember when, and we were all very taken with notions of the 'East.' I remember seeing Omar Sharif in the movie and thinking of your father! The East was very remote, very 'other,' and we romanticized and idealized it, the way you do as a teenager. Baghdad was this exotic city. When I thought of Baghdad then, it was a place bathed in a golden light connected to the Ottoman Empire, a city with a skyline of minarets and domes like Istanbul, but with the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flowing through it and palm trees everywhere. It was some thing out of a fairy tale." (69-70)

The image that Mary portrays of Baghdad falls neatly into the Western perceptions of the Orient. Although the images are not negative, nevertheless, they still focus on an unrealistic image of the East. While the West has developed and ventured out of the "fairy tales" of the middle ages, the East on the other hand, has stood still in time, like the images presented in Hollywood films. bell hooks states that "[e]ncounters with Otherness are clearly marked more

as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger” (370); therefore, Leilah’s father becomes, in this case, the exotic ‘other’ who embodies the characteristics of the mysterious and brave man of the far away deserts.

As an adult she comes to the realization that the two parts of herself—the Iraqi and the English—are not only different culturally, but they are on opposing sides politically. She describes this contradiction stating,

I realized that my mother’s culture was terrorizing my father’s. . . . Battles and empire produced our family, and so we are the fruits of war. When I look in the mirror, I try to guess which of my features I inherited from my Iraqi father and which from my English mother. But the same clash of cultures that created me is also a part of what makes it impossible for me to visit my ancestral home. Now, as I watch this war [Gulf War II], it’s as if one part of me is invading the other. I feel like this war is between two cultures whose blood flows in me, and it makes my experience entirely different. To look at me is to look at both the aggressor and the victim. I am both the enemy and the ally. (33-34)

The above passage uncovers the fragmentation that Nadir feels due to the allied invasion of Iraq; she perceives herself as a reflection of the confrontations between her two cultures.

In her memoir, Nadir also displays a strong sense of displacement. Nadir is displaced in two ways: the first displacement is due to her inability to belong to one culture or one identity, especially in this situation of war. The second displacement is because she is incapable of visiting her father’s native country, Iraq. Unlike the other women in this study, Leilah has not been to her father’s native country, nor was she exiled from it, but like the other women in this study, she feels a strong sense of belonging to Iraq; she gains this connection only after the

second Gulf War when she asks her father to uncover his past life. Nadir relates, “ I knew little about his relationship to Iraq or his extended family. His past had been submerged inside him, and he kept it from us for reasons we didn’t understand” (34). Furthermore, her father does not socialize with other Iraqi families in England, nor does he “live out an Arabic life” (35) after the family moves to Canada. Instead her father “assimilated willingly and easily, and was happy in the West” (35). He seems to accept his place in Western society and he does not shape his daughter’s identity with his own Iraqi past, heritage, and culture.

However, in another section of the memoir she talks about her father’s alternate identity when she tries to pronounce Arabic words: “It reminded me of when he spoke the language to our relatives on the phone, or when I saw him read a letter in Arabic or write in Arabic script. It reminded me that my father had an alternate existence that I was not privy to, a family that I did not know” (37). The urge to relate to and understand this “other” part of her father leads her towards a journey to discover that part of her identity:

Despite desiring to know Iraq, I’d never thought of how different my life might have been if Iraq had not been such an isolated country, but now I wondered what it would have been like to visit my family in their own home in Baghdad. Maybe I’d speak Arabic in Iraqi Christian dialect, maybe I’d know how to cook Iraqi food, I’d know about the poetry, the music, the culture, the history. (37)

Nadir’s interest in her Iraqi identity grows with the stories that her father finally reveals to her in her adulthood. While Leilah’s narration shows a sense of regret in her speech because she is unable to fully identify with her Iraqi self, at the same time she defends her inability to connect with that self because of the instability of her father’s country. In addition to her physical distance from Iraq and its culture, her father’s fear of returning home adds to that sense of

distance. At the age of sixteen her father left Iraq to study on a government scholarship in hopes of returning to “bring his knowledge back home” (34); however he fell in love with Leilah’s English mother and never returned. She relates: “As the Iraqi regime was so ruthless, my father never knew what would happen if he went back, so he never risked returning to his homeland” (34). In her mind, Iraq becomes a forbidden place that only symbolizes threat and fear, rather than a warm memory of home and family.

However, her attempt to establish a connection to her father’s family, and in turn to her Iraqi identity, increases with the beginning of the second Gulf War. She follows the war on television and in the newspapers. She writes “I am alone at home in Vancouver watching Baghdad burning on television” (27). Her anxiety concerning the destruction she sees on television is heightened after she contacts her father on the phone: “His choked words echo in my mind: ‘There are people in all those buildings. Those aren’t empty buildings. Just think of that’” (27). Her father’s reaction to the war is intimate and personal, unlike his past distant accounts; his reaction also initiates her own sense of fear for Iraq and its people. The war suddenly becomes personal for her as well as she realizes that the people on the television screen could be her own relatives and friends. She narrates:

I imagine all the people I know who are trapped and cowering under the threat of those bombs landing on their houses: my great-aunt Lina, my cousins Karim and Maha, their children Reeta and Samir, my other uncle and aunts on my father’s side who I have never met. I think of all their extended families and of my friend Farah Nosh, an Iraqi- Canadian photojournalist. (27-8)

For Leilah, the people on the television screen begin to have names and faces, rather than be images of a group of unfamiliar and distant Iraqis. At the point when she realizes a connection

to her Iraqi self, she also realizes that the war and its devastation will only lead to further fragmenting of that self. Her past aspirations to finally visit her father's native country are interrupted by the war. She reflects on seeing Baghdad in a photograph on the front page of *The Globe and Mail*: "The peaceful city is a beautiful golden sandy hue and pale green date palms line the Tigris River. Staring into it, I felt cheated. I was finally seeing Baghdad, but it was about to be destroyed" (28). Nadir's distress, however, is not only concerning the image of Baghdad itself, but it is also about the family with whom she is finally feeling a sense of connection.

However, her understanding of Iraq and the Gulf War reaches her in fragments that she has to connect together. Other than her father's stories of his past, Nadir's only connection to her family in Iraq is limited to phone calls, emails, and photographs taken by her friend Farah Nosh. In her struggle to further reconnect with family members in Iraq, Leilah decides to contact Karim, the husband of a distant cousin, through email (112). He becomes her first line of connection with her father's native country; he is also her first connection to the devastation that the war has left on the Iraqi people. She relates his thoughts of the war: "He told me that he had survived three wars now spanning twenty years, and that, 'there is no one that we did not fight.' He said Iraqis had become acclimatized to war, and Iraq had lost millions of people. Death has become 'an ordinary thing for us' (122). Karim becomes her link to Iraq and the Iraqi experience of war: he helps her understand the difficulties of living under such conditions and the struggle to survive from day to day.

The news on television and in the newspapers provides more images for Leilah to connect to the stories she hears from Karim and her aunts in England. She explains her reaction to these images: "The feelings are new and awful, and the photographs tear at my heart. The

tears are falling and I cannot control them. . . . For the first time I know what the desire for revenge feels like” (91). Within Leilah’s sense of connection, she begins to feel the pain and suffering that Iraqis are facing. This sense of trauma or pain is described by Ross Chambers as ‘phantom pain’; he argues that, this is “the capacity to experience the pain of the another, or of others, as wholly or partially indistinguishable from a ‘remembered’ pain of one’s own” (Chambers 102), rather than the neurophysiological phenomenon that is found in medical contexts. The pain and anxiety that Nadir relates to is an extension of what her family is feeling back home.

Nadir uses Karim’s emails as direct proof of the inhumanity of events taking place in Iraq. Her memoir relates the reality of the situation Iraqis were living through in the aftermath of war. The stories that Karim tells become more detailed and uncover the amount of loss and destruction that the Iraqis suffer. His stories range from the American invasion of Baghdad, to the fall of the city, to the aggressiveness of the American soldiers towards civilians. During one of their conversations he describes when the Americans surprisingly entered his street while a civilian car with a family inside drove by: “[t]he soldiers shot at the car and killed everyone in it. . . . they have done many mistakes to the Iraqi people” (133). As the months pass, Karim’s stories reveal the difficulties faced by Iraqis in their everyday lives. The morgues began to overflow with bodies, as “[b]ombing raids, suicide bombs, car bombs, IEDs (improvised explosive devices) as well as random killings at check points and other murders all contributed to the high death rate” (151-52). The situation grows more dangerous and closer to home as Karim relates threats on his life and explosions that take place in his neighborhood:

The blast was so near, the sound so loud, that the windows shattered and the air conditioner flew out of the wall. (Ironical, seeing that it hardly worked anyway.)

the explosion was like an earthquake, and Karim went out to see the dead. At least twenty of his neighbors were killed and one of the destroyed houses backed on to theirs. (199)

While Karim's stories of violence give attention to the danger that Iraqi people were living in (and are still living in to some extent,) at the same time his narrations also shed light on the inefficiency of health organizations, the crumbling economy for the middle class, and the rise of religious fundamentalism. Leilah tries to envision these incidents, but is unable to comprehend the situation through which her family is living in Iraq. She compares her own life to theirs:

I walk out into my street and suddenly notice how many cars are parked there and how many drive by, one every few seconds. The engines are loud, I can't ignore them. I imagine being afraid of every one of these cars. I pass other people in the street, men, women, children, and I am not afraid. Spring is coming slowly to Vancouver, the cherry trees are starting to blossom, the crocuses are out, orange and purple in the grass, and the snow drops have almost finished blooming. (248)

The comparison shows the calm, systematic way of life that she and other Canadians are living. She is unable to even imagine the fear and anxiety in which her family lives. Her life, like the lives of those around her, is predictable like the spring season that she anticipates. While Karim's testimonies over the phone and through emails enable Nadir to comprehend some of the trauma that her relatives are going through, at the same time these testimonies remain fragments of the reality that they are facing thousands of miles away from her.

Karim is not the only person supplying Leilah with these stories from Iraq. Her friend and photojournalist, Farah Nosh, also helps her understand the condition of Iraqis through photographs and her own diary, which was written during her stay in Baghdad. Leilah relates sections from her friend's diary in her memoir. Although Farah's diary offers her own personal view of the second Gulf War, at the same time it adds another perspective to Nadir's diary. Farah's narration provides Nadir and, in turn, the reader a family's perspective on war from the home front, as they experience loss and exhaustion from trying to support and raise families in such grim conditions.

Farah also sends Nadir a number of pictures of the latter's family in Baghdad in addition to the pictures of the American occupation to the country. The pictures help solidify the images of the incidents that Nadir's family faces in these trying times. Nadir includes random images taken by Nosh and presented in a slide show for family and friends (see "Chapter Fourteen: Portraits of the Wounded"). The pictures that Nadir chooses to include in her own memoir are of amputees; all of the wounded are men. This focus on the men shows a form of fragmentation in itself; not only are the men literally fragmented because they have lost body parts, but it also symbolizes the fragmentation of the Iraqi family dynamic. The inability of these men to live normal lives means that they have become dependent on the women in their families to provide and support them. Nadir relates Farah's own narration of this dire situation, "[h]e is the only provider of the family, all young kids.' . . . 'How is he going to work? There is no compensation, there is no organization that is going to give these guys a monthly salary to keep their families going'" (220). Through her photographs, Farah manages to capture some of the stories of suffering that the Iraqi people have experienced, but more importantly she provides a visual context for Nadir to connect between the stories and the

images of her family in her father's native country. Furthermore, the stories that Nosh tells Nadir show a society fragmented by trauma and displacement, which reflects on Nadir's own understanding of her identity.

In conclusion, trauma and displacement are fragmenting factors in the lives of Iraqi North American women life narrators. Their reflections of war and loss lead to a sense of splitting the self in order to cope with the impact of the traumatic situations that they and their family members experience in the homeland and in exile. Furthermore, through this study it has become apparent that displacement is not limited to the act of exile from the country or home; displacement for these women begins in their homelands and in their native city of Baghdad. The issue that is evident in these works is the sense of the narrators' fragmentation in their homeland due to the unstable situation that arises from the political and social changes taking place. However, as will be discussed in the final chapter, stability for these women becomes possible once they reach North American shores at one point or another. Therefore exile, although displacing them physically, also becomes the home in which they can write/ tell their journeys and thus re-establish their identities.¹⁰

Notes

¹ Caruth explains the term trauma as described by Freud in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

² During the negotiations of partitioning the Arab countries after WWI, Kurdistan was attached to Iraq as a part of Mosul province. Kurds were “appointed in the administration, education, and judicial offices in the region, with Kurdish as the language of these services” (Simon and Tejirian 57).

³ National Film Board of Canada

⁴ Please refer to Chapter One.

⁵ Chapter One discusses the history of Iraqi Jews and their expulsion from the country in the 20th century.

⁶ I refer to this incident earlier in Chapter Two.

⁷ The concept of the farmhouse in Iraq is similar to the concept of the cottage in North America. However, according to Salbi, the farmhouse she refers to is a house “on palace grounds” (75) granted to the Salbi family by Hussein. The house was one of many enclosed in the palace compound.

⁸ Trebil is the border city between Iraq and Jordan.

⁹ Zakho is a town in North of Iraq, in Kurdistan.

¹⁰ The issue of displacement in the homeland will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three

Defragmenting the Self

The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call 'our homes.'

-Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity* (3)

The subject of autobiography is always self-definition, but it cannot be self-definition in the void. The memoirist, like the poet and the novelist, must engage with the world, because engagement makes experience, experience makes wisdom, and finally it's the wisdom -- or rather the movement towards it -- that counts.

Vivian Gornick, "Memoir: An Inward Journey Through Experience." (np)

To a large extent, every autobiography imposes narrative form on an otherwise formless and fragmented personal history.

Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects* (xiv)

Through the written and oral narration of their experiences of trauma and displacement, Iraqi North American women have established a foundation for Iraqi women's stories and voices in Canada and the United States. As displayed in the second chapter of this study, these narratives explore some of the traumatic experiences and displacements that Iraqi women have underwent and the fragmentation of identity that resulted from these experiences. However, this chapter aims to show that these narratives also portray these women's abilities to defragment their identities and thus reflect endurance and persistence to piece together the fragments of themselves that they lost during these experiences, and thus establish newly formed selves. They achieve defragmentation of identity by (1) reconstructing their subjective identities through the act of life narration itself, (2) through relationality, which allows them to maintain a collective

identity, and finally (3) by resisting patriarchal and Western influences on how they perceive themselves and their experiences. Thus they are able to defragment their sense of disjointedness and reaffirm their sense of Iraqiness. Through the process of narrating, they establish agency over the presentation of themselves in their own perspectives, as individual Iraqi/ Iraqi North American women.

Identity changes with the changes of personal and social alterations that take place in our surroundings and, in turn, within ourselves. Ian Chambers states:

What we have inherited—as culture, as history, as language, as tradition, as a sense of identity—is not destroyed but taken apart, opened up to questioning, rewriting and rerouting. The elements and relations of our language and identities can neither be put back together again in a new, more critically attuned whole, nor be abandoned and denied. The zone we now inhabit is open, full of gaps: an excess that is irreducible to a single centre, origin or point of view. In these intervals, and the punctuation of our lives, other stories, languages and identities can also be heard, encountered and experienced. (24)

Thus migrant identities are expanded to accommodate such alterations as they are forced to add memories and experiences to what has already been established in their countries of origin. For Iraqi women in the diaspora, the issue of identity is already loaded with diversity due to the multiple frames of identity to which these women belong. According to Grad and Rojo, “multiple identities arise reflecting the different social relationships. . . and different identities may be invoked depending on the situation” (6). Thus religious affiliations, multiple cultural histories, and the experiences that are obtained during the journeys of Iraqi women, in their homeland and in the diaspora, all add to the complexity of the concept of identity in this study.

However, it is my belief that individuals that undergo a number of displacements gain an understanding of more than just one culture, and, in turn, gain a multiple consciousness that allows them to live outside their native nations and cultures. This ability to adapt is not achieved through assimilation of their identities into the cultural identity of the host country, but through the ability to reconstruct the self so that it thrives in both cultures. Grad and Rojo state that,

[t]he fact that the person represents different roles does not mean that he or she has various identities, but rather that it is the ensemble of roles played that shapes his or her particular identity. Identity is thus constructed as a coherent story, where changes are part of the continuity and a host of narratives of being in the past, present and future are interwoven. In other words, these narratives create continuity and coherence between what the narrator *was* and what he or she *is* today. (11)

The experiences that these Iraqi women relate have allowed them to adjust to changes, establish new selves, and embark on new experiences. Fragmentation and instability are reduced through the process of retelling their experiences and life stories.

1. Defragmenting Identity through Narrating the Self

The act of life writing or life narration, in general, is a form of establishing agency through constructing an image of the self and of the history of that self from the perspective of the life narrator. In the works of all four women narrators in this study, there is an urgency to define the self and comprehend its place as an active subject. Suzette A. Henke asserts that “[t]he act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and, in so doing, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies

and of effective agency in the world” (*Shattered Subjects* xix). Autobiographical writing and oral narration for Iraqi North American women presents insight into the complexity of their identities that reflects multi-layered affiliations, interests, and cultures. Through their life writing, these women are able to display their unique selves by portraying their ability to contest the boundaries and limitations of borders and societies that try to eliminate one identity or the other.

“To narrate,” suggests Wen-Chin Ouyang, “is to bring cohesion, coherence, and structure to fragmented memories; it is not only to write history but to take control of one’s destiny... [w]riting is, therefore a willful journey toward the center, ending in some form of homecoming” (82). This homecoming symbolizes the ability to re-establish an identity in North America that is uniquely a mixture of both the Iraqi self and the North American self. These writers bring to life the experiences and struggles of being a woman, Middle-Eastern, a Muslim (in some cases), and an immigrant in a country that is far not only geographically but also culturally from their native homes. The new country, in this case Canada or the U.S., becomes salvation from war, refugee camps and threatening chaos in their native countries. While the transition may be to a safer, more settled space, at the same time this transition is the most difficult because it is a forced exile into what is most likely the unknown.

Furthermore, the act of narration in itself for Iraqi North American women helps them establish identities that reject the stereotypical Western perceptions of Arab women, and also endure the fragmentation of displacement created through multiple migrations, as they maintain the authority in presenting themselves to the world. As Ricoeur states, “Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves” (qtd. in Kerby 40). For Iraqi women narrators, there is a need to redefine the self

according to their newly acquired experiences and losses. The act of life narration for these women is, therefore, a declaration not only of existence, but also of authority over the presentation of their unique selves. As they re-examine their pasts from a different place and time, the act of narration enables the re-examination and realization of identity through the “process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission” (Smith, *A Poetics* 45). Through their life narrations they gain the ability to present themselves and their stories in the image that they desire; they are no longer bound by the fears, restrictions, traditions, and cultures of their families and societies back home. While the concept may seem simple, the ability to achieve this state of independence from past restrictions is complicated. These women struggle with their perceptions of themselves and their positions within these new roles that allow them to dictate their pasts without the limitations that they experienced in their native countries.

For instance, in her memoir, Zainab Salbi declares that after her migration to the United States she tried to erase her past identity by constructing a new one. Salbi resists the inevitable sense of loss and isolation by taking control of her own life. She narrates:

I found myself stranded in America by the [first] Gulf War. That was the most painful time of my life. For very good reasons, I had come to trust no one, not even my mother. I had just turned twenty-one, and I found myself all alone for the first time as fresh new fears were heaped on all the old ones. I did what I needed to do in order to survive, though it was not nearly as simple as I make it sound: I erased the pilot’s daughter and started over. I creased my life down the middle like a spine of a book when you bend the pages back very hard. You could read

the first half of the book of my life, then read the second half, and not know they were lived by the same person. I wanted it that way. I needed it that way. (4)

For the first time in her life, Zainab is free to construct her life in the manner that she chooses; even her rhetoric reflects determination and authority. The act of writing her memoir becomes an act of liberation from past fears and restrictions. As she describes throughout her work, her fear of Hussein is instilled in her from childhood; however this fear is also realized after she arrives and establishes herself in the United States. She relates:

I didn't feel safe just because I was in America. Every Iraqi knew the Mukhabarat [Iraqi Intelligence Agency] had spies around the world. There were many stories of Iraqis in exile who were attacked in their own homes or assassinated. . . . But my fear, like that of many Iraqis, was not based on reason alone. I feared Saddam with every part of my body and soul, and that organic fear would never leave me. . . . I never participated in classroom discussions on Iraq. I never wrote school papers about Iraq. (213-14)

However, Salbi's choice to overcome her personal fears and write a complete memoir, not only about her personal life experiences, but also about her family and reveal her opinions and perceptions of Hussein's character and actions to the world shows her resistance to allow that fear to control her life like it did her family's.

Furthermore, she refocuses this determination for change by forming a purpose in life and an authority to follow it, whereas in the past she was controlled and fragmented by her parents' inability to protect her from their own failures. She states, "I created a whole new identity for myself as the founder and president of a nonprofit women's organization called Women for Women International, which supports women survivors of war" (4). Her newly established self

enables her to cope with her past fragmentation of identity due to trauma and displacement and, at the same time, it motivates her to help other fragmented women around the world cope with their own traumas.

In addition to her newly established identity, Salbi also tries to reconstruct her mother's subjectivity through her writing; Salbi confesses during her mother's last visit to the U.S., "I wanted to bring back the strong, independent mother she had been" (237). After years of living trapped in Hussein's inner circles, a stressful marriage, and finally a divorce that leaves her shunned by her closest friends, Alia loses her vibrancy and love for life. However, Tess Cosslett argues that mothers are neither helped nor "empowered" ("Matrilineal Narratives Revisited" 151) by their daughter's stories; while the daughter may achieve subjectivity in her own autobiography, the mother in the same text does not because her story is told through her daughter's narration rather than her own. Contradictory to Cosslett's findings, Salbi's memoir does seem to restore a form of subjectivity to her mother, Alia, by including sections from the latter's diary¹ that relate past incidents in the family that were never revealed to Salbi while she was living in Iraq. The sections reveal the stressful struggles of living so close to Hussein, and they shed light on his beginnings as a man of ultimate power in Iraq. By including these sections the narrator tries to restore her own trust (and the trust of the reader) in Alia. The diary excerpts, in addition to the narrations of conversations between mother and daughter, also reveal the magnitude of fear that Salbi's parents felt while they were a part of Hussein's private circles and their inability to control their own lives or the lives of their children. Salbi narrates one of her mother's passages: "We had to be silent witnesses to his crimes," she wrote. "We were among the victims for no one can survive his atrocities. And we kept on being imprisoned by our own fear, afraid of saying no to him or even showing our horror at his acts" (250). However, Alia's

most disturbing confession to Salbi is when she explains (earlier in the memoir) why she married off her daughter at such a young age. Salbi narrates her mother's confession: " 'I had to get you out, *habibti*! [trans. my darling]' she finally said. 'I had to! He *wanted* you, Zainab. I didn't see any other way '" (240). From her mother's confession, she realizes that Hussein had hinted to Alia about his interest in Salbi. The chain of erratic decisions made for Salbi by her mother suddenly begin to make sense and Salbi is able to revisit and defragment these past incidents with more reflection on the memories that she was unable to understand before. The important act of narrating the past becomes a form of re-connection between mother and daughter after years of detachment and bitter feelings. Salbi realizes her mother's real intentions for marrying her off to a stranger in a strange land, and the trust between them is once again revived. Salbi writes:

I looked at Mama's beautiful eyes, so red and wrenched in pain from how unfairly I had treated her. I felt such an outpouring of trust and love that I fell into her arms, and we sobbed together at what he [Hussein] had done to both of us and at the years we had lost. I felt her pain and her ragged releasing of it. That was one of the most powerful moments of my life. It was the time I became her daughter again, and the moment she regained her ability to comfort me. I asked for her forgiveness and she asked for mine. How could she know that to save me from rape, she was sending me into the arms of a rapist? (241)

Alia is able, through her own confessions and stories, to change how her daughter and the readers view her role in her daughter's sense of fragmentation. The confused feelings of being displaced from the family home and their care due to her mother's decisions are suddenly seen as the only form of protection that Alia could give her daughter at the time.

After her mother is diagnosed with ALS, she is only able to express herself through writing. Salbi regretfully realizes that the only way that she can understand her own past is through her mother's writing; Salbi writes, "Mama had the other half of my memories, the half that made mine make sense" (252). Alia's notebook becomes a vital part of constructing Salbi's own subjectivity, and, in turn, it enables her to defragment memories that have developed her identity over the years. Therefore Salbi tries desperately to recover all that she can from her past through her mother's narration; she writes: "Each night I came home from work and read what she had written, like a series. . . . familiar moments came to my mind framed in disturbing new contexts" (248). However, while Salbi begins to patch together the fragments of her memories, her mother, through the act of life narration, also achieves a form of subjectivity through her daughter's memoir.

Similar to the parent child dynamic in Salbi's memoir, the relationship between mother and son in *Baghdad Twist* is a central part of Joe Balss's documentary. For Joe, his connection to Iraq and his understanding of his Iraqi identity is established through his mother's memories. Thus his mother's narrations function as relational connections to his Iraqi self, but for Valentine her narrations represent her sense of authority. His departure from Iraq, before the young age of four, leaves him with only blurred memories that need to be materialized through his mother's narrations. His memories of Iraq and the trauma that his family survived is limited and mostly dependent on what his family imparts of their past. The memories presented through his mother's narrations, and even through the videos and fragments of documentaries that he includes in the film, provide an image of his family's past life. Although Joe pieces together these memories through assembling the documentary and conducting the interview, at the same time the fact that these memories are his mother's establishes her authoritative role in the work.

Without her narrative, Joe cannot form an image of his family history before their migration to Canada.

For instance, Joe Balass is unable to recall these places without the visual documentations provided through family videos and the stories that his mother relates. “For displaced populations of our age,” writes Seyhan,

parents’ biographies, autobiographies—veiled or revealed—autobiographical fictions, testimonies, and memoirs become the restorative institution of personal and group memory. Here memory is an intersection between personal recollection and historical account, and though self-consciously fragmentary, it intimates the virtual existence of a longer collective narrative of nation, ethnic group, or class.

(17)

For Joe Balass, his mother becomes the only authoritative source on that part of his life; thus he needs Valentine’s memories to complete and support his own understanding of his Iraqi identity.

Nevertheless, what Valentine can and cannot remember is also very important in understanding the relationship between mother and son in the documentary. At one point Joe asks her, “Do you think you generally have a good memory? Do you remember things well?” (Balass). Through these questions, Joe attempts to prove to the viewer and to himself that his mother is capable of reconstructing a credible history of her past life. She confidently answers, “Yes I think I do I have a good memory.” But Joe is not satisfied with this answer alone, as he proceeds to ask, “You understand why I ask you all these questions?” (referring to the interview in general) to which Valentine answers laughing, “Maybe you want a memory for yourself of Iraq, no?” Valentine’s statement reinforces the concept that Joe does not have memories of his

past, nor of his identity as an Iraqi. He can only establish his Iraqi self through his mother's narrations of her own memories.

In other sections of the documentary, Valentine's ability to remember is challenged as she tries to remember a song from the late sixties by Mary Hopkins titled, "Those Were the Days," but her memory fails her:

Valentine: Those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end. Um, I can't remember now. (Keeps humming the tune to the song).

Joe: Do you remember the rest of the words now?

Valentine: I can't remember, no. But I used to know it very well. It's years, I mean over 36 years ago, 38 years ago. I don't remember.

Joe: It's funny what things stick in your mind, isn't it.

Valentine: Well, it sticks in your mind not in my mind.

Valentine: Those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end. . .

Joe: We'd sing and dance forever in the day

Valentine: Ahh, we'd sing and dance forever in the day. How come you remember it?

Joe: I'm surprised you don't because I remember you singing it so often to me.

(Balass)

The conversation tackles the concept of remembering as it reveals what Valentine chooses to remember from her past. Joe in this instance is not only the interviewer, but the promoter of her memories. He helps her fill gaps in her narrative by asking questions and directing the conversation according to what he wants her to remember of her past. This discussion may contradict the power of Valentine's authority in presenting her own narrative, but the

viewer/listener has to remember that Joe's family history cannot be complete without his mother's narrative. In addition, Joe confesses that his own recollection of the song is actually built on his mother repeatedly singing the song to him. Thus, the conversation sets the dynamic between mother and son: the mother is the authoritative figure, who holds the key to the family history and the son, who needs and encourages the narration of this history to understand his own position within it.

2. Defragmenting Identity through Relationality

In addition to the defragmentation of identity through the act of narration, for Iraqi North American women in this study, relationality also allows them to uncover and reconnect with fragments of themselves in order to form more cohesive selves that are able to overcome trauma and displacement. Relationality in these texts is not limited to gender-based relationality or the connections with parents or loved ones, but it is inclusive of other people in the community who share their need to reconnect to their originary homes and selves in the Iraqi diaspora. These life narrators find ways of relating and connecting themselves to their cultures and histories, and thus redefining their own understanding of their Iraqi and Iraqi North American identity. Miller and Tougaw explain this phenomenon:

The culture of first-person writing needs to be understood in relation to a desire for common grounds—if not an identity-bound shared experience, then one that is shareable through identification, though this too will vary in degrees of proximity. The memoir and all forms of personal testimony not only expand the boundaries of identity construction and the contours of the self but also lay claim to potential

territories of community. In complex and often unexpected ways, the singular ‘me’ evolves into a plural ‘us’ and writing [or oral narration] that bears witness to the extreme experiences of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective fabric. (2-3)

The text that most apparently deals with relationality in this group of memoirs is Leilah Nadir’s *The Orange Trees of Baghdad*. Nadir’s whole memoir depends on the concept of relationality, as this study has already explored in previous sections. Nadir’s work brings a number of relational ties into the frame of the memoir: her parents; her relatives; and her friend and photojournalist Farah Nosh. Relationality in the text is, therefore, not limited to people but to a specific place in the memory of the people that Nadir relates to. She is unable to recollect her paternal, Iraqi past or the Iraqi experience of war without telling the stories of her family members; the complete memoir, with the exclusion of minor sections, is built on these stories.

Nadir portrays a vivid picture of a home that she was never a part of and has only seen in pictures. She states, after a paragraph that describes her father’s home garden in Iraq:

That is not my recollection. The picture is hidden inside my father’s memory. . . .
I feel Iraq in my bones, though I have never been there. I have never lazed in the shade of the date palm on a stifling hot day or underneath the grape leaves hanging on the vine in the evening. I haven’t smelled jasmine or orange blossom scenting a Baghdad night. I’ve never tasted mango pickle with *masgouf*—the speciality fish dish of Baghdad—at an open air restaurant on the banks of the Tigris. . . . I sense the garden only through my family’s stories; words and pictures about its smells, the searing heat, the light, the butterflies, the storks, eating the Baghdadi delicacy of buffalo cream there. (16)

The memoir begins and ends with these memories that are provided for her by her father and his family members. Although she is unable to travel to Iraq, she gains a sense of her Iraqi self through relationality.

However, as a young girl, Leilah is introduced to her father's family and culture during their visits to her home in Surrey, England. She recalls these visits fondly stating, "Without realizing what they were doing, my father's relatives immediately transformed the English house usually run by my mother into an Iraqi home run by all the women" (21). Leilah elaborately retells her experience of these visits by describing each family member, their exotic cuisine, their language that was strange and "sweetly foreign" (22), and more importantly the atmosphere of Iraqi culture. She goes on to describe her own sense of belonging after her grandmother sends her a "traditional Arab costume" (25). She explains, "I felt different compared to all the other times I'd played dress-up. My dark brown eyes and brown hair looked right underneath the black scarf. My features that hadn't looked pale enough in my maroon English school uniform suddenly felt like they had a place" (25). By connecting with her paternal family, she also connects, for a short time, with her Iraqi self; this self contradicts and complicates that image of herself that she describes earlier as a "typical English schoolgirl" (20). Thus, she is able to defragment her identity by realizing that she is able to establish an identity that is British and Iraqi at the same time. She does not have to sacrifice one or the other in order to feel that she belongs.

In Mikhail's *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, the concept of relationality is similar, but differs in who she chooses to portray in her memoir. For Mikhail, her relationships with other writers are very important because they make up the only community to which she feels she belongs. She relates their stories by characterizing them, talking about their own literary

achievements, and how they and their work affected her own growth and development as a writer and a person. She divides the people in her life into letters and photographs that she places in paper and plastic bags consecutively; she tells her readers “All of my letters I kept in a paper bag” (67) and later she says, “My photos I kept in a plastic bag” (68). These two bags, along with her poetry, seem to be the only things that travel with her from Baghdad to Amman and then finally to the United States. However, the attachment that Mikhail has to these letters and pictures is not an attachment to objects; instead Mikhail seems to carry a community of people (writers and others) with her by adding their letters and pictures to these bags. She imagines that by putting the pictures together in the bag, she not only carries them with her, but she allows the people in the pictures to connect to each other as well. She writes: “In my bag of pictures, all my friends are close/ to me and to one another/ no matter how far they were in real life” (77).

In the second part of the book, Mikhail recalls the memories of her loved ones and acquaintances by looking through the pictures and letters, and eventually retelling her experiences with the people in them. For example, she writes

My mother in her wedding dress
looks much younger than my father.
“I didn’t see him until the wedding,” she told me.
“In those days husbands were like fish in the river—
you couldn’t know if they were good or bad.
But thank God, your father was the best person in the world.”
Sometimes my mother wears kimonos or short skirts in the pictures.
“Those were the good old days,” she says. (70)

The pictures reflect past memories, but at the same time they also reflect moments in which

Mikhail's mother reveals personal and cultural information to her daughter. The history of her parents' marriage, the liberated Iraqi society, and most importantly, the relationship between Mikhail's mother and father.

The pictures and letters also address the more personal issues in her life, like when she writes of her experience of love. She relates:

Of all my letters, there was one that I read again and again.

It was a love letter. Of all my pictures,

there was one that I stared at for long stretches:

Mazin and I at college, with two of our friends.

Arwa and Hassan introduced me to Mazin

when he was visiting from the battlefield in Al-Faw

He had clipped some of my poems from newspapers

and saved them.

Mazin gave me the letter when we were walking in the rain

from the College of Liberal Arts to Baghdad's Central Library.

While we walked he repeated the first line of Al Sayyab's poem

"The Song of the Rain": *Your eyes are two palm-tree forests in early light.* (72)

Although the stanza ends with images of love and intimacy, the line immediately after disrupts these visions and memories. Mikhail states, "When I left Iraq, I didn't know if Mazin was alive or dead" (72). The letter and the picture become the medium for recollecting past memories of hope, even when the present situation is fragmented with loss, loneliness, and uncertainty.

Relationality in Mikhail's poetic prose also allows her to tell the experiences of other Iraqis living under fierce dictatorship. The images bring about not just happy recollections of

people in her life, but also allow for the discussion of brutal realities that her friends endured.

She describes one of her colleagues, Abdul Razzaq:

He was easily surprised and laughed suddenly and loudly.

But secretly he was a sad person.

His brother had refused to join the army

and was killed by the government.

His family was not allowed to mourn the death,

and they had to pay for the price of the bullet

that was used to shoot him. (79)

The memories that Mikhail narrates through her character descriptions are not all her own memories; they are the stories that she was told by her friends and family members, but they help her re-establish an image of her own identity from the fragments of letters and pictures in her bags. In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Paul John Eakin suggests that relationality not only presents “the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other” (58). In Mikhail’s work, as in the work of Salbi and Nadir, the representation of the self is tightly connected to the representation of others. The description of each of the people in her letters and photographs all contribute to her understanding of herself in relation to all the people that have influenced her understanding of herself as an individual. Finally, the pictures play a role in the memoir as they come to symbolize her own collective self that has found its place in a liminal space between her past life and her present one.

Like Mikhail, Salbi’s relational ties to her mother help to reconstruct her past, and in turn her identity, as addressed in an earlier section of this chapter. However, Salbi’s second husband Amjad Atallah also has a significant role in helping Salbi reconstruct her relationship to men and

her perception of herself as an admired and loved being. Amjad becomes the support system for Salbi, offering her assistance when she needed him, but also allowing her to find and establish her own sense of self. Her relationship with Amjad becomes equal to a healing process, through which she is able to confidently confront her past traumas. In her memoir she writes:

I found myself talking to him about Fakhri because, despite my vow to leave my past behind, I felt he deserved an explanation. I remember looking at his face for some reaction: a rejection? But I only saw kindness in his eyes. So I kept on talking. . . . for the first time. I realized what it felt like just to tell someone openly about my feelings and my own life. I cried at some points and laughed at others. It was healing and reassuring, and it felt so good that I found myself telling Amjad almost everything I had vowed to myself to keep secret, so he would understand how important it was for me to start over on my own. (201-02)

By relating her story, Salbi invites Amjad into her world and allows him to help her heal from the trauma and displacement she felt in the past. As an Arab man himself (Palestinian-American), he is able to rebuild her image of Arab men, like her father and her first husband, as he comes to represent the opposite of both. Amjad, through his relationship with Salbi, becomes an agent of defragmentation himself as he accepts her past and works with her to construct her future.

Through relationality, Iraqi North American women are able to reconnect with their pasts and the pasts of their family members, friends, and communities. The narration of the self is thus bound with the narration of others' lives and experiences. Their experiences influence the narrators' perceptions of themselves and their positions within the larger communities they live

in or have lived in, thus enabling these women narrators to defragment the sense fragmentation caused by trauma and displacement.

3. Defragmenting Identity through Resistance

Resistance plays a major role in the process of defragmenting identity in the life narratives of Iraqi North American women. The act of resistance adds to their sense of agency and proves their unwillingness to adhere to the restrictions that patriarchal societies, in their native countries and in the West, subject them to. There are three things that these women resist in their narratives displayed both in their discourse and their experiences: they are: resistance to patriarchal restrictions, resistance to patriarchal interpretations of war, and resistance to the stereotypical representations of Arab women's identities.

Resisting Patriarchal Restrictions

Iraqi North American women narrators are bound by the restrictions of their native patriarchal societies in addition to those found in their host countries. Geoffrey Nash observes that Arab² women's perspectives and stories of trauma and displacement are limited both in the homeland and in the host country. He states that opportunities for Arab women in their native countries to write or narrate their autobiographies "in an unmediated form" are scarce due to "gender restrictions" (156) compared to Arab women who choose to write in English. In addition, even writing as immigrants in North America and Europe brings about complications for these women. Nash argues that

the sense of liberation achieved through adoption of the freedoms provided by Western culture are often to be offset by a deeper complex of emotions in which feelings of loneliness, loss and guilt arise alongside and in conjunction with

experiences of racial and cultural prejudice and rejection at the hands of the host society. (156-57)

Arab female autobiographers in the West face the criticism of Western readers who do not or cannot connect with them or understand their experiences. However, Grace contradicts Nash's claim by stating that,

“[i]n third-world women's literature, the age-old problems of women in society and the quest of women for a true role and meaning in life are transformed in a variety of ways through the expansion of women's consciousness—socially, creatively and spiritually. The female authors and protagonists frequently overcome the seemingly insurmountable problems inherent within patriarchy—forging new realities and redefinitions of the self. (*Relocating Consciousness* 64-5)

In her memoir, Salbi directly addresses the patriarchal restrictions on her attempts to retell her past. She is faced not only with her father's disapproval of her choice to tell her story, but with her own hesitation of bringing to light the stories that included her family members and Saddam Hussein. She contemplates these issues as she discusses her decision with her father. She states, “I was worried that raising my voice about family concerns, not just those related to sex, could cause some to consider me to be dishonoring my loved ones” (285). However Salbi comes to the realization that “if there was anything a woman owned, wasn't it her voice?” (285). At that moment Salbi breaks from the patriarchal restriction of her society and confronts her father by asserting,

I need to take control off my own voice, and that entails breaking our family vow of not talking about our relationship with Amo. Our family has always been lost

between two worlds, Baba [trans. Father]. People inside the palace considered us outsiders and people outside considered us friends of Saddam. If we remain silent, people will think our silence was agreement. I can't remain silent anymore. If we don't write our truth, history will write it for us. (285)

Salbi's confession and declaration to write about her past, including Hussein and her own family, is an act of courage to confront her past and construct her future. Her decision is one that neither of her parents were able to make; therefore her insistence to write her past becomes the interrupting force to a cycle of silent suffering.

While these women try to reconstruct themselves in their host countries, at the same time they become objects of criticism by their own people, both in their migrant communities and in their homeland because they are seen as extremely liberated due to the fact that they address issues often considered taboo. Zainab Salbi, for example, reveals her experience of falling in love with a young man in Baghdad. She narrates, "I reached over and put my hand on his and felt the warmth of his hand under mine. It was a very daring move, and I kept my hand there, touching him for the first time, feeling my heart flutter. We looked into each other's [sic] eyes for a very long time. We both knew we were in love" (142). However, Salbi immediately explains to her Western readers (what her Arab readers already know): "Technically, a proper young Muslim girl wasn't even supposed be alone with a man. Dating is not sanctioned in Iraqi culture and Arab culture at large—it still isn't—until the couple is betrothed" (142). Salbi comprehends her culture's patriarchal restrictions on her ability to express her experiences; however she shows her resistance to these restrictions by addressing the incident of her rape on a personal and professional scale. In addition to confessing to her readers the details of her own rape, she relates the stories of women traumatized by rape, for instance in Croatia and Bosnia-

Herzegovina. The fact that Salbi approaches such a topic as an Arab woman is a form of protest to her traditions and culture back home. In her memoir she explains that if women admitted to rape in her culture “they opened themselves up to abandonment by their husbands and separation from their children because women carried the family’s honor, or aar [trans. disgraceful]” (253). Salbi finds that the only way to eradicate such crimes is to bring them to light and confront them.

Resisting Patriarchal Interpretations of War

Iraqi North American women life narrators present images of loss and fear, but they also present images of strong and determined women who face war and displacement at the home front. In *Women and the War Story* (1996), Miriam Cooke discusses Iraqi war literature and the main themes in this genre. Cooke points to two major features of Iraqi war literature. The first is the dominant voice of the male writer that portrays the masculine perception of war as it “glorifie[s] men’s heroism, humanitarianism, and patriotism and women’s jingoism” (233). The second feature is the limited role of female characters in the literature of Iraqi men, as women “are reduced to patriotic symbols” (234). Women protagonists in such literature motivate their husbands, lovers and sons to participate in war and welcome the idea of martyrdom. Like most world literature concerned with war, the perception of war is mainly masculine as “men were [viewed as] warriors, [while] women were watchers. Warriors talked about other warriors, women waited and listened” (Cooke, “Arab Women” 14). Moreover, even the occasional portrayal of women as soldiers in the works of Iraqi male writers is a masculine representation of women that hardly mirrors Iraqi women’s experience of warfare (24). Nevertheless, Cooke points to an interesting aspect in Iraqi war literature that seems to distinguish it from other Arab war literature. “[I]n Iraq” Cooke argues, “it is primarily the women who have found ways to

write against the war” (24). Iraqi women writers, she says,

showed that their society’s male-dominated values and the war they created were self- destructive. Since they could not with impunity criticize their leader, they directed themselves to their readers. Their writing creates citizens with a conscience who can see through the manipulation that mobilizes a whole nation to fight a foolish war. (24-5)

In addition, Iraqi women’s protest of war is also hindered by the fact that women’s writings were not read as frequently as men’s work, nor were they as scrutinized by official censorship (24). So a few Iraqi women writers did find indirect ways to protest against the war, but they were overshadowed by mainstream Iraqi war literature written by men, which portrayed patriotic men and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the presiding regime and country.

In an article on trauma in women’s war narratives (2006) Kamran Rastegar states that,

[t]he closure of trauma often inherent in. . . narratives of war, be they historical texts or popularized ‘war stories,’ attempts to rationalize the violence that characterizes the experience of war. . . . These narratives, in searching for simple resolutions, are most often founded upon inflexible representations of gender roles or identities. Thus, largely authored within imaginations centered in masculine tropes, women are most often marginalized in the narrative of war and communal conflict. (22-3)

In addition to the resistance to patriarchal representations of war that Iraqi North American women in the diaspora relate, there are two important examples of Iraqi women writers who wrote (or write) from within Iraq who appeared during and after the second Gulf War. “Riverbend” (2003)³ and “Iraqigirl” (2004) present their own points of view and

experiences about the war and Iraqi culture during these times. Their writing shows their knowledge of the politics of the events and their opinions are based on structured and intellectual arguments against the American invasion of Iraq. Although the popular Iraqi blogger Riverbend⁴ is not one of the main writers examined in this study, she is a good example of the unlimited potential that Iraqi women have for presenting their perspectives from the home front, as she discusses the war and the chaotic aftermath from a politically educated point of view. Through the act of writing, itself, Riverbend manages to present a resistant front against not only the US invasion but also the dominant patriarchal constructions that enforce roles upon women in such situations. As Mohanty, Pratt, and Riley explain, the “normative constructions of femininity mean that women are told that their role in wartime is to be quiet supporters of militarized men” (10). In Riverbend’s situation, as an Iraqi woman, her role was to quietly accept the US invasion as a form of “liberation” for Iraq; however she repeatedly, boldly describes the American presence in Iraq as an occupation of her country. Nadine Sinno describes Riverbend in these terms:

This ‘Third World’ woman carved out a space, a territory, not usually accessible to most marginalized people of her gender, age, or nationality. She appropriated technology, namely the Internet blog, to provide her alternative narrative of what is going on in her immediate environment. She also appropriated English, the language of the dominant discourse, thus making her views accessible to a wide audience of English speakers who otherwise might not have access to her blog.

Riverbend’s blogs challenge the master narrative fabricated and disseminated by US mainstream media.... (131-32)

Riverbend contradicts the images of the war and the US invasion presented by US media and she

complicates the validity of the whole campaign against Iraq. She also presents a very different image of Iraqi women to Western readers, which was very problematic to some of these same readers who felt she, like other Iraqi “[g]irls and women sat at home, in black burkas, making bread and taking care of 10-12 children” (Riverbend 34).

Like Riverbend’s blog, the narrators chosen for this study present Iraqi women’s resistance to the patriarchal assignment of roles for women in times of war and peace. Therefore, these women offer a wider perspective of Iraqi women’s lives; their focus is not only concerned with the war and its aftermath, as seen in Riverbend’s blog, but their narratives are concerned with different eras and different political changes in Iraqi history. Similar to Riverbend’s blog, Iraqi North American women’s narratives present a dialogue of resistance towards masculine portrayals of war, destruction, and diaspora. Women provide perspectives from the home front that reflect the struggles of surviving war and devastation as mothers, wives, and daughters. Shereen Abou el-naga states:

When women started to carve space in the domain of autobiography, they did not adopt the masculine coherent autobiographical 'I' as a model or criterion against which to measure their position. Their writings reflect, usually, their contradictory and relational subjectivities (105).

Abou el-naga’s statement provides the opening for a discussion on women’s autobiographical identities in North America and in the Middle East. The concept of life writing for Iraqi North American women developed from the need to voice their own experiences of war and diaspora, rather than become echoes for the masculine voices of their country. Furthermore, “[m]emory provides a landscape of survival to script war narratives” as they utilize “literature as a nonviolent discourse of contestation” (Mehta 8) to the destructive incidents in their countries.

Writers like Dunya Mikhail challenge mainstream Iraqi war literature by presenting Iraqi women's experiences of war. She steers away from depicting the stereotypical Iraqi, who is presented as the patriotic superhuman. Mikhail explains Iraqi war literature by claiming that "A huge amount of Iraqi war literature that was published inside Iraq, especially during the Iraq-Iran war, depicts the Iraqi soldier as a 'superman.' That doesn't mean all of that literature was trash, but only few Iraqi writers presented the Iraqi soldier merely as a 'human being'" (Mikhail, Personal Interview). She also believes that women and men perceive war differently, and thus portray their experiences differently. "As a woman," she adds, "I could see the war in the streets, in the tears of mothers, in the eyes of birds frightened by bullets, in the holes of the walls and of the helmets of those men returning from the battlefield" (Mikhail, Personal interview). Through her work, Mikhail has managed to create an image of war that is at times universal and at other times specific to the Iraqi experience of war.

Through her work *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, Mikhail, like Salbi, uses her memoir to uncover the atrocities against her people by her government and by the Americans during the war. Although the first part (1991-1994) of her work includes images of soldiers (even martyrs), at the same time, the majority of the characters in her work are from all different social classes, sexes, ages, and professions. She tries to present these characters with a type of subjectivity; she gives them distinctive roles in her memoir to reflect their own ideas along with hers.

Although Mikhail uses a form of allegory to hide the real personalities she refers to in her poems, the identities and incidents are clear enough for Iraqi Intelligence police, who interrogate her about the work. Referring to Hussein as Zeus and his henchmen as tigers in her work, she writes:

His tigers paced in their cages.

They purred in the night as they devoured the spoils,
and in the morning when Zeus passed, they mewed.
These tigers gave lessons on the art of domestication
before a portrait of Zeus holding a whip in one hand
and gold in the other. (49)

With these few lines, Mikhail presents the concept of silencing an entire nation through fear. Hussein is seen to offer his people gifts with one hand only to tame them with a whip in his other hand. Mikhail also portrays an image of living under tyrannical rule. The lines uncover the unsettling reality that pushed the Iraqi people, out of fear, to sacrifice themselves, their beliefs, and each other for the sake of the leader. Their inability to confront his actions only leads them to become more entrapped in their own borders unable to find safety and freedom. She continues her story about Zeus:

The masses emerged with fire still on their clothes,
hailing the fires and those who had built them.
Zeus toured the heavens, the gods bowed
and climbed on one another's shoulders
to help him finally reach the devil.

Once he put hell in his pocket
and descended to cast the sparks of hell over his people.
He extended his hand in greeting
and rain fell on it. A madman shouted
that a cloud was urinating on his hand.

Zeus ordered that the cloud be burned in front of the people
and scattered over the sea.

And when the waves churned with sorrow

He surrounded them with barbed wire. (50)

However, Mikhail asserts that the oppression of the Iraqi people is further enhanced by their inability to protest against the wars that ravished their country. Hussein, according to Mikhail's description in the first part of the poetic memoir moves enthusiastically from one war to the next:

The wars multiply

and discard us.

As for the other one,

He sets off tiptoe over the graves,

on his way to another war. (32)

Without taking notice of the death tolls from the eight-year Iraq-Iraq war or waiting for the restoration of his people's lives after their traumatic experiences, Hussein stealthily attacks Kuwait and plunges the country into the first Gulf war. Mikhail, at the time of writing these sections of the memoir was living in Iraq, which transforms her statements from mere testimonies to protests against the Iraqi leader. The censorship of written works was brutal, and the danger of being caught or suspected of treason meant that she placed her family and herself in constant endangerment. Her work moves her readers to the point that "one often encounters pain, anguish and dead ends" (Handal 23). Mikhail maintains that her "poems strive to seem 'cold' in the most intense situations" (Mikhail, Personal interview). It is the coolness of her approach to the intense topic of war that catches her readers off-guard and forces them to look a second time at the images of human distress she produces through her words.

However, Hussein is not the only person she criticizes in her work; she aims to uncover the destructive forces of war and all who participate in it. She writes that, “In war, no one is rescued from death./ The killed die physically/And the killers die morally” (19). According to Mikhail, the loss that people suffer is a loss of humanity along with the physical loss of life. She shifts back and forth from accusing the Iraqi government to accusing the allied forces of ruining the lives of the Iraqi people, who are the main ones caught in the middle of these battles for power. She makes the heroes in her memoir the general people in Iraq, instead of the Iraqi soldiers or the American ones. She reverses the gaze towards the Iraqi people’s suffering; she gives voice to those who the media has forgotten to mention.

She goes on to incorporate her own experience of the first Gulf War, portraying the feelings of being insignificant pawns in the game of war:

Once again
we bow
to let war fly over us.
They sit quietly in front on their electronic screen
and press a button
and their planes scream towards us again
as if the hell their new machines have made
is not enough
to face the paradise of meeting our loved ones. (16)

She expresses, through her poetry, the powerlessness that the Iraqi people feel as the war erupts once again in their country. They are silent, bowing down to greater forces (Hussein and the Western allies) that have made the decision of participating in war on their behalf. They are

helpless against the attacks of modern weaponry and they are also helpless in saving themselves from the brutalities of war.

Even after Mikhail migrates to the United States, she is still very much connected to the effects of war on the Iraqi people. With the end of the second Gulf War changes in Iraq that would have been seen as symbols of liberation and development after the second Gulf War have no effect on the Iraqi people because they are too busy trying to survive in the war's aftermath.

She narrates:

Saddam and Bush both promised victory
Sanctions are lifted, but Iraqis don't care
They stand in long lines
for gasoline either way. They
Get their fingers painted when they go to vote
and say: "All the politicians are puppets,
but they are better than Saddam." (121)

In another stanza she criticizes her host country, America, by addressing the politics of the American government:

America is but a baby of a country.
She doesn't really mean to cause problems.
She always thinks it's easier to replace problems
than to fix them. "Your washer is broken,"
the repairman says. "It is easier to replace it than to fix."
"Your country is broken," the politician says.
"It is easier to replace it than to fix it."

America bombs with one hand
and shelters with the other. (120-21)

Unable to fix the situation in Iraq, America has decided to replace it with a new system. Mikhail uncovers the actual purpose behind the American invasion of Iraq and refutes the U.S. government's display of heroisms as it acts as the liberator of the Iraqi people.

When asked about her decision to write about war, Mikhail claims, "Why not war poetry when the war was (and is) all I saw, smelled, and heard? The war is the mess that I tried to shape or form in my writing. And poetry remains our best response to the catastrophe" (Mikhail, Personal interview). Writing becomes the medium through which Mikhail can defragment the effects of the war on her life and the lives of Iraqis around her. Through writing her experiences of war, Mikhail gains the authority to control the images of trauma, fear, and displacement witnessed by herself and her people. She gains agency as a writer who refuses to stay silent against oppression, unlike other writers who avoided such issues altogether for fear of persecution.

Resisting Stereotypical Representations of Iraqi Women's Identities: Hybridity

In addition to resisting patriarchal limitations in their life narratives, Iraqi North American women resist the stereotypical simplified representations of Arab women's identities through constructing complicated hybrid identities. The term hybridity originated from the biological field; however it began to be used in colonial discourse in the 19th century (Guignery 2). Anjali Prabhu (2007) argues that hybrid "is a colonial concept. This is not just to say that the term was coined during the period of high colonialism, but that it served certain interests, which were central to the colonial enterprise. Hybridity, then, is first and foremost a 'racial' term" (xii).

However, during the 20th century the term began to be applied in linguistic and cultural disciplines, and more recently it has been adopted by postcolonial theorists (Guignery 2-3). Born out of the fragmentation caused by colonial structures, hybridity disrupts the “concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/ historical/ racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder” (Bhabha 94). More importantly, it leads to the “fixity” of stereotypical representations of the Other, thus denying development, change, and diversity of identity (Bhabha 107).

Nevertheless for some scholars like Ien Ang, in “Together—in—Difference: Beyond Diaspora, Into Hybridity” (2003), hybridity does not achieve its purpose. Ang claims that

Hybridity [. . .] is a concept that confronts and problematizes boundaries, although it does not erase them. As such, hybridity always implies an unsettling of identities. It is precisely our encounters at the border—where self and other, the local and the global, Asian and Western meet—that make us realize how riven with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict these encounters can be. This tells us that hybridity, the very condition of in-betweenness, can never be a question of simple shaking hands, of happy, harmonious merger and fusion. Hybridity is not the solution, but alerts us to the difficulty of living with differences, their ultimately irreducible resistance to complete dissolution. In other words, hybridity is a heuristic device for analyzing complicated entanglement. (149-50)

Ang⁵ points out very critical points concerning hybridity, mostly focused on the inability of actually achieving a hybrid identity because of the conflicting natures of Western and Other

cultures. However, Ang overlooks the concept that hybridity is not established in order to achieve “complete dissolution” (50), but to bring together diverse aspects (cultural or other) of the self in a way in which they compliment and strengthen identity and allow it to thrive within a liminal space, or third space, as Bhabha suggests, that does not deny one or the other.

In Iraqi North American life narratives, these women narrators establish unique identities through the portrayal of hybrid selves that resist stereotypical representations of Arab women. In order to defragment their identities, which have split into multiple selves due to trauma and displacement, Iraqi North American women establish a liminal space in which they can construct a hybridity of identities that allow them to adapt and cope with change. Groups or individuals that occupy this space experience a kind of ‘two-ness,’ as two identities trying to exist within one person” (Lyall Smith 7). Thus the individual exists in a hybrid space that enables her to navigate “between two cultural groups and [occupy] space with both cultural groups” (7). In this space they are able to reflect both their Iraqi self and their North American self. For example in the final stanza of Mikhail’s *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, she narrates:

Larsa scatters the old pictures
and mixes them with the new ones.
She mixes pictures of snowballs in Michigan
with pictures of a round city with two rivers
palm trees
poetry
wars
a thousand and one nights.

The pictures that she carried around with her in a “plastic bag” are scattered by her daughter

Larsa and the images and memories of Mikhail's past, that were once fragmented, are mixed together to portray a new sense of self for the poet. Larsa, herself becomes a symbol of both Mikhail's past and future and the hybridity of her identity that encompasses her Iraqi self and her American self.

However, hybridity in these works also allows them to portray a diverse image of Arab/Iraqi women to the Western reader/viewer. These women live as modern and educated women, while still reflecting the characteristics of Iraqi culture. Furthermore, in addition to shattering the stereotypical image of Iraqi women, the image of Westernized Iraqi women in these texts, on some level, enables the reader/viewer in North America to identify with the protagonists in these texts. This approach also invites discussions about the fact that these women need to present different or alternate images of themselves in order to attract Western readers/viewers. Heehs argues that, "[c]ontemporary critics of first-person writings agree that narrators of diaries and memoirs are personae and not persons, images projected by the writers with future readers—themselves—or others in mind" (6). While these selves try to establish a medium of communication between the narrator and the reader/ viewer, at the same time, these women do not lose their sense of subjectivity as individuals, separate and unique from other Iraqi women and other Iraqi North American women.

The Dilemma of Westernization in Iraqi North American Women's Narrative

The concept of Westernization of Iraqi women is controversial because it addresses the idea of occupation and the negative effects of that occupation on Iraqi culture. Lila Abu-Lughod states that

we have to ask what Western liberal values we may be unreflectively validating in

proving that “Eastern” women have agency too. ...and more importantly we have to remind ourselves that although negative images of women or gender relations in the region are certainly to be deplored, offering positive images or ‘nondistorted’ images will not solve the basic problem posed by Said’s analysis of Orientalism. The problem is about the production of knowledge in and for the West. . . . As long as we are writing for the West about ‘the other,’ we are implicated in projects that establish *Western authority* [italics mine] and cultural difference.” (105)

The affects of colonialism, which have been ingrained in Middle Eastern mentality, refuse women’s traditional Iraqi dress and cultural traditions, as they are made to reflect weakness and backwardness. However, Western perception of the East is not only reflected in the way that the women are presented as oppressed or uneducated. The problem with presenting Iraqi women as liberated, also, to some extent means, that the concept of liberation will be presented through a Western lens. For instance, Zaineb Salbi portrays her mother as an exotic figure while trying to portray the sense of liberty that women Iraqi society have within their own gender groups. She, in my perspective, aims to show that the separation between men and women in Iraqi (and Arab society) does not limit their ability to express themselves as female subjects. But Salbi’s description falls on the borderline between western images of Arab women and the representation of liberated women in the Arab world. Salbi describes a women’s gathering in Baghdad, but her image seems to be an Orientalist image of harem and belly dancing:

In Iraq, as in much of the Arab world, men and women socialize separately. Women dance together throughout their lives, a joy most Western women miss out on. One of the most enchanting images in all my memory, the one that

symbolizes for me carefree moments now lost, is of my mother handing out dozens of exuberantly colored scarves to her friends. Then with Arab music turned all the way up on the stereo, these professional women would belly dance in their ridiculously heavy platform shoes and *Vogue* outfits, pull bright chiffon against their hips, and shoulders, and ululate at the top of their lungs. Aunt Samer, my mother's tall and graceful older sister, moved her hips in slow classic patterns of seduction. Mama was the most raucous and fun to watch. Her body shimmied faster than a tambourine in tight little waves no one else could match, her long dark hair shining as it whipped around her head like a halo playing catch-up. (11)

The earlier images of Westernized women suddenly seem out of place as a more sexualized, exotic Oriental image replaces it. "In Western popular culture," explains Ella Shohat, "the Arab female body, whether in the form of the veiled, barebreasted women, . . . or the Orientalist harems and belly dancers of Hollywood film, has functioned as a sign of the exotic" ("Post-Third-Worldist Culture" 198). While Zainab could be eager to present her mother's character as a mixture of both Western and Eastern qualities, the image of dancing women in a harem-like atmosphere provides a contradictory image to the liberated, educated women whom Salbi attempts to present repeatedly. Not only is the image of harem exploited in Western culture, it is also considered degrading in Arab culture as well. Shay and Seller-Young claim that

[t]he past century has witnessed the phenomenon of belly dancing becoming a key icon of the Middle East in the West. This iconic representation often causes outrage, resentment, and even protest among Arabs who resent Westerners (mis)representing them by focusing on cabaret-style belly dance, a low-class and disreputable symbol for many in the Arab world, as a primary media image of the

Middle East. (13)

The exoticized figure of her mother fits more adequately into the stereotypical images of Middle Eastern women of the Orient in Western thought. Shay and Sellers-Young add that

the images projected by Westerners in the performance of belly dance and other forms of oriental dance raise the thorny issue of orientalism. The vocabulary of the dance and its position within the framework of the West, especially the United States, as "other" provide an "empty" location, as in "not part of my culture" for the construction of exotic new fantasy identities. At the same time, as a repository of media stereotypes and thus Western fantasies of women, it also provides physical images via the *femme fatale* which [sic.] the (generally female) dancer emulates in order to play an assertive sexual role in a male-dominated Western society. (14)

Therefore, Salbi falls into the trap of Western mentality already embedded in her "educated" and "forward" thinking. The fact that Salbi presents Iraqi women in this way is part of what Serge D. Elie terms as "the harem syndrome," which he describes as "part of a continuing clash of perceptions between protagonists of the European West, looking through a (neo-) Orientalist prism, and those from the Arab East who are antagonistic toward the West, looking through an Occidentalist optic" (140). Although Salbi tries to provide an image of female companionship and care-free enjoyment, a contradictory image to veiled and oppressed Muslim women, she still fails to discard the Western influence on the representation of her mother and other women in her culture.

Finding a Common Ground

Western influence, both European and American, can be seen in the works chosen for this

study clearly through, for instance, the fashion sense shown in the videos and pictures of Balass and the narration of Salbi, who try to show the modernity and Westernization of Iraqi women, which they both portray as positive. The pictures of “civilized” Iraqis, who dance the Twist and dress in Western clothes, relate a strong sense of the images planted in the Iraqi conscious that views the positivity of replicating the West rather than the cultural Iraqi dress and traditions which were presented as backward or negative. In both Balass’ documentary and Salbi’s memoir there is an urgency to show that Iraqi women were (and are) educated, liberated, and contemporary according to Western standards. Due to the fact that they are Third World women, they seem to have a vital need to represent themselves as modern and conforming to Western standards in order to be accepted and “taken seriously” by the Western reader. Talpade Mohanty contends:

[The] average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (“Under Western Eyes” 400)

This need stems from a sense that their Third World selves are not taken into consideration or validated because they are incapable, as oppressed women according to Western standards, of representing themselves. Cooke states, that

[f]irstly, and like women elsewhere, they are victims of gender relations that benefit men. Secondly, and like their male kin, compatriots, and coreligionaries,

they are struggling with the problems and challenges left behind by colonial rule.

The European colonizers may have left Arab soil, but they left behind a burden of colonial legacies that link different Arab nations vis-à-vis a global system that may or may not include them in its purview. (“Women, Religion” 160)

Middle Eastern women, in most cases, have lost the privilege of being uniquely identified individuals because as postcolonial or Third World⁶ women they are “seen as an undifferentiated group uncomplicated by the heterogeneity that their conceptual counterpart (‘First-World women’) in the more developed world” (Bahri 212). More importantly, “the grid through which we rank the humanity of the [Middle East],” states Laura Nader, “is based on how we perceive their treatment of womenfolk. The way in which we construct the place of Arab women is one of the keys to the control of others. . . . The West is more civilized by the status and rights of its women” (qtd. in Elie 140). Thus, narrators like Salbi, Balass, Mikhail, and even Nadir repeatedly try to show a contrary image of Iraqi women who work outside the home , live freely, and are powerful figures in their families and societies.

For instance, in *Baghdad Twist*, the documentary presents video clips that tell of a Westernized and developing Iraqi state; Balass shows girls in modern dress playing sports at schools, working in fashion, in labs, and in hospitals. Even Valentine shows her pride in the fact that her mother had dresses made for her just like the ones that Shirley Temple wore. Once again the need to seem Westernized is apparent. The focus of the British narrated clips in *Baghdad Twist* display a side of the massive changes that took place in the lives of urban Iraqi women and girls. Although the narrator talks about the “young people” of Iraq the images are mainly only of young woman. The British narrator states:

When you see these young girls in their Western clothes, so assured and

confident, you're inclined to forget how surprised their mother would have been at the idea of training for jobs their daughters take in their stride. Jobs they thought that only men could and should do. And it's natural with all these modern developments, the women in Iraq are breaking way from their traditional style dress, unaltered for centuries, to wear the practical, comfortable clothes that are right for this life. (Balass)

The images along with the narration of the short film in the documentary aims to show the changes that have taken place in Iraq after the British occupation.

Valentine Balass talks about her own childhood, as she tells her son of the special treatment she received because she was the only girl in the family. Her mother's attention to dressing her daughter in expensive clothing made by the best dressmakers in Baghdad shows that her status, as a girl, was respected and that she was greatly cared for. The videos and photographs in the documentary present a very modern, very Westernized culture where women and men dance together dressed in the latest fashions of the time (See fig. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4. Scene from Joe Balass, *Baghdad Twist* 2007. <http://www.nfb.ca/film/baghdad_twist/>



Fig. 5. Scene from Joe Balass, *Baghdad Twist* 2007. <http://www.nfb.ca/film/baghdad_twist/>

Although Valentine speaks of the restrictions that she faced as a girl, these restrictions are limited, like not being allowed to swim in the Tigris River, while her brothers did:

Joe: Did you go swimming in the river?

Valentine: No, papa didn't allow me. My brothers went swimming in the river, but he said a girl cannot swim.

Joe: Did you want to?

Valentine: Sure, I wanted to. I wasn't allowed. He was very conservative. (Balass)

Nevertheless, Valentine, even in early 20th century Iraq, was well educated and taught not to let the men in her life take advantage of her. She relates to Joe:

It was tough, actually because I have two brothers older than me and three younger than me. At first, when I was very small, I used to obey them and they liked it. And then mama didn't like that, so she told me don't accept. So we started to fight. The only way to defend myself was to scratch them. And my mom saw that I was fighting back so well. If they hit me once, I hit them twice. So she said, I knew [trans from Arabic] you're not the type to accept any abuse. (Balass)

Here, the image presented of women in Iraq is far from the oppressed or abused Middle Eastern women presented in Western culture. The documentary by Joe Balass, as a whole, tries to present a counter-image of Iraqi women in general, not only Jewish Iraqi women; he presents images of women who are working, studying and enjoying their liberties as modern women of the mid-twentieth century.

Similar to the images of women in *Baghdad Twist*, Zainab Salbi's memoir also presents the hybrid Iraqi identity. Zainab's mother is a strong Muslim working woman, and she comes from a financially comfortable family. Salbi tries to show that Iraqi women, like her own mother and later like herself, do not fit into Western molds of Muslim, Middle Eastern women. Sabli reaches into her mother's past to show that this phenomenon of modern, educated, and dependent women did not begin with Zainab herself, but from earlier generations of Iraqi women, represented by her own mother and her mother's female friends. Salbi begins the memoir with her mother's history, rather than her own:

My mother grew up in a grand house, with a courtyard and sixteen rooms, on the Tigris River the house belonged to my grandfather, who died before I was born. Mama inherited from home a modest fortune—a share of the house and his factories, a quantity of gold, and a family name that means something still. (1)

Sabli presents her mother as a woman of fortune, of high social status and lineage, unlike the Western images of Middle Eastern women who are portrayed as poverty stricken and have no role in family businesses. The “ ‘status’ or ‘position’ of women is assumed to be self evident,” argues Mohanty, “because women as an already constituted group are *placed* within religious, economic, familial, and legal structures” (“Under Western Eyes” 412). Thus the distinction of Arab women, or Arab Muslim women, from other women around the world has already been set

by Western standards that deem these women as oppressed and incapable of independent thoughts or actions; they “never rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status” (Mohanty 413). Salbi tries to extinguish these stereotypical beliefs through the modernized image of a strong woman, as she explains that her mother was also a teacher, which immediately conveys that she was educated and received an additional income, rather than being dependent on what her father or her husband provided for her. Not only is her mother independent, but Alia also separates herself from other women in her society by defying the social expectations forced on her by the Baath regime. Salbi relates: “My mother resented the notion of anyone trying to tell her how to act or dress, let alone how to think. When she got her recruitment notice to attend a Baath Party meeting, she showed up in heels and her Nina Ricci mink—a combination (from what I could ascertain later) of the bold and oblivious” (34). Salbi goes on to compare her mother’s courage to that of men in their society, who were unable to express freedom of thought and action due to their fear of the ruling regime. This comparison aims to eradicate any notion that her mother’s character and personality fit neatly into the Western image of Iraqi women.

The life that Sabli’s mother leads, and the way she chooses to raise her daughter are also far from the Western portrayals of “third world women,” a fact that Salbi is very much aware of when she states: “Though its hard to imagine, given all that has happened since, growing up in Baghdad was for me probably not unlike growing up in an American suburb in the 1970s” (2). Sabli attempts to equalize the two cultures, of Baghdad and the U.S, through comparison. Thus, not only is her mother different from the stereotypical Iraqi woman from a Western perspective, but she is also equal to other women in the West due to the way she has lived her life and raised her child. “I spent many hours driving around with my mother,” says Salbi, “running errands and shopping, driving to and from school, going to piano lessons, ballet lessons, swimming lessons,

and just tagging along” (2). Salbi’s life, if taken out of the context of her memoir, can easily reflect the life of any Western girl growing up in North America. Once again, there is an insistence on how she wants her mother (and herself by association) to be viewed by Western readers.

In *The Orange Trees of Baghdad*, Leilah Nadir also insists on presenting the Iraqi women, as well as the men, in her family as modern and Westernized. She begins one of her own recollections by stating, “I’ve seen my grandparents’ wedding photograph, taken in a studio in Baghdad on the day they were married, August 8 1943. They were dressed in Western-style clothing: Victoria in a long white silk dress with a tiara of orange blossoms and a very long veil that trails down her back, and Khalil in a black suit with a white bowtie” (45). Nadir’s attention to these details shows her attention to the importance of showing that her Iraqi grandparents were modern in their lifestyle and, in turn, in their Western way of thinking.

The women in Nadir’s Iraqi family are also strong and independent. For instance, her paternal great-grandmother was a midwife and a nurse; her life is active, productive, and she provides for her large family. Her grandmother was educated and worked as a teacher to contribute to the family income; Nadir writes: “Victoria became a teacher; she had to study quickly and get a job as soon as possible to help contribute to the family when my great-grandfather died” (44). Other women in her family like her great aunt “took economics at university and worked her way up to a high position in Customs and Excise” (44). Her great aunt was also a midwife with strong connections to people in high political and social positions. Her influence enabled her to release her husband from political incarceration. Nadir relates of her great aunt Madeline and uncle Daoud: “I think he was in prison for three years, maybe less. Think Madeline pulled strings and more or less got him out. She was a respected midwife and

had lots of contacts. People felt that because she helped bring their children into the world, they had a kind of obligation to her. So if she wants you and you are a minister or something, you would give her your time” (48). For Nadir, like the other narrators in this study, it is important to re-establish a counter-identity for Iraqi women, who are bound between stereotypes of oppression and exotic images of “otherness.” She shows strong, capable, and worldly women who sponsored and supported even the men in their lives.

Göçek and Balaghi state that “[o]nly by conveying the complexities of Third-World women’s subjectivities, and by problematizing the depiction of tradition as constricting can we start to reverse Western hegemony” (5). Through establishing images of strong independent women, Valentine Balass, Zaineb Salbi, and Leilah Nadir portray a different perception of Iraqi women, who show more complex identities than the clichéd Middle Eastern women who are grouped together without any attention to uniqueness or diversity.

In conclusion, defragmenting the self for Iraqi North American women narrators is achieved by establishing agency to write, speak, and express, in their own voices, their experiences of trauma and displacement. The remembered experiences of these women are essential to further understanding Iraqi women’s identities, as “[r]emembrance is valuable for marginalized groups such as women and ethnic minorities. These subjects and communities must constantly remind the national masculinist culture of the imperative to witness and to acknowledge the voice, experience, epistemology, and memory of women and postcolonial individuals” (Hua 200). Fragmentation of identity, although it exists for Iraqi women in the diaspora, does not render these women’s identities as weak; instead it allows these women to explore new aspects of themselves, which would not have been possible if they remained enclosed in their nations and cultures.

Notes

¹ I realize that the inclusion of Alia's diary within Salbi's memoir serves to establish Salbi's subjectivity more than it does her mother. One issue that is easily argued here is the fact that excerpts were most likely translated by Salbi herself, thus further framing her mother's subjectivity within the bounds of her own narrative. Nevertheless, the construction of the memoir gives Alia an important position in Salbi's life and memories from the beginning of the text. Both Salbi and Alia aim to change the path that Salbi takes in her life so that her story does not repeat or reflect her mother's. Thus to a certain extent, I feel that Salbi achieves a form of subjectivity for her mother.

² Arab women include Iraqi women. See Chapter One for further reference.

³ Riverbend is the pseudonym for the author of the blog *Baghdad Burning*.

⁴ While the Riverbend's audience is most likely focused in Europe and North America. The decision not to include her as a main narrator in this study is due to the fact that she writes from Iraq, rather than from North America.

⁵ Ang's article focuses on the Chinese diaspora.

⁶ Bahri notes that, "the term 'postcolonial feminism' is often used interchangeably with 'Third-World feminism.' This overlap is significant in that it signals the particular relationship of both formulations 'postcolonial' and 'Third-World,' to the 'First-World.'" Invested with suggestions of 'lack,' 'underdevelopment,' and 'difference,' the Third World by virtue of nomenclature if nothing else, stands in a clearly hierarchal relationship to the West." (211)

Conclusion

It is difficult for anyone to retrieve memories from childhood and from life's painful moments. One memory prompts another, then another. I have done my best to recall them accurately. I have tried to give Western readers a glimpse of Iraqi culture and religion, but these come only through a very personal filter. The last thing I would claim is to represent all Iraqi women, let alone all Arab women or all Iraqis. I am a mix of the cultures and times in which I have had the privilege to live.

Zainab Salbi, "Afterword" (291)

My interest in Iraqi North American women's life narratives stems from a pressing need to uncover the experiences of Iraqi women whose oral and written narratives depict the challenges that Iraqis have faced, and still face, through three major wars, thirteen years of sanctions, and nearly a century of political and economic unrest. Their works began to appear in the literary scene mainly after the second Gulf War in 2003. Through their writing and narrations, these women introduce Iraqi women's experiences of war, oppression, and mental and physical displacement; at the same time they portray an intelligent awareness of the cataclysmic changes that took place in Iraq. In their stories, they explore their own abilities to overcome these difficulties and establish stable and confident selves through the process of defragmentation. As evidenced in the life narratives of Zainab Salbi, Valentine Balass, Dunya Mikhail, and Leilah Nadir, these women reconstruct selves that enable them to defragment loss and fragmentation by counter-narrating the stereotypical identities that have been bestowed upon them by Western and patriarchal societies and discourses that limit them to representations of weak and oppressed Middle Eastern women.

When I began to discuss the seeds of this research with other colleagues and academics in 2007, I found that very little is known about Arabs and Iraqis in North America. Western perceptions are limited to the media's representations of these cultures and rarely do these outlets cover the day-to-day lives of these people, not to mention the false representation and generalization of women in these cultures. Therefore, it seems appropriate to present a background of Arab and Iraqi culture and history to understand some of the aspects that have influenced the construction of identities in Iraqi North American life narratives. The first chapter provides a general overview of political and historical events that took place in Iraq like Farhood, the three Iraqi wars, and the aftermath of the second Gulf War, and thus helps contextualize the histories and incidents that these women relate and to in their narratives.

The first chapter of the study also aims to show the multicultural and diverse backgrounds from which the narrators originate. Although it may seem contradictory, the chapter portrays two very opposite, but vital, points about Arab culture. The first point is concerned with the diversity of Arabs; contrary to Western perceptions, Arabs practice different religions, exist in diverse cultures, and even speak different dialects. The second point presents the exact opposite message: Arabs have a sense of unity that exists in spite of the above-mentioned differences. These same concept are reflected in the identities of these Iraqi women narrators: although they all identify as Iraqis, they are diverse in every possible way. Their migration to North America only adds to their diverse identities; however they still reflect loyalty to and identification with their original home. Their refusal to disconnect completely from their Iraqi selves shows resistance to the hegemonic and homogenizing cultures and systems found in North American, especially

the United States (Naficy *An Accented Cinema* 15). Therefore, their identities can neither be described as static or simple as stereotypes may suggest. Through their life narratives they reveal complicated, hybrid identities that integrate a number of different selves as they learn to recover from their traumatic pasts and adapt to new environments.

Another important topic that this study addresses is fragmentation of identity in the life narratives of Iraqi North American women. The main causes of fragmentation are trauma and displacement. Trauma for these women is a result of a number of different experiences like American air raids during the Gulf wars, loss of loved ones, or suffering oppression. The traumatic experiences overlap with the sense of displacement that can be experienced mentally, physically, or both. Even Nadir, who does not experience these disturbing events personally, begins to relate to the suffering of her family and friends in Iraq. From the beginning of her memoir, she begins to experience feelings of loss and, even, the “desire for revenge” (91) for the Iraqi people.

Displacement is also experienced differently for these narrators, but all of them experience mental displacement at one point in their narratives. The sense of displacement begins in the homeland or among family and friends as the women begin to feel out of place, and they gradually begin to lose a sense of connection to those around them. The loss of a sense of belonging is either by choice, as in Salbi’s disconnection from her family, or forced upon these narrators, as in *Baghdad Twist* when Valentine, along with other Iraqi Jews, is made to feel unwelcome in her own neighborhood. Displacement becomes physical at the point of migration, which is actually considered as forced exile by Balass, Salbi and Mikhail. The women do not leave their countries in search of a better lifestyle; they leave because they are placed in dangerous situations that

affect their wellbeing. Even for Leilah Nadir's father, the impossibility of return is supported by her grandfather's fear of his son's imprisonment or compulsory recruitment into the Iraqi Army. The stress and fear of imprisonment, oppression, and even death prompts these narrators' displacements from their homes.

In order to defragment their identities these Iraqi North American women need to construct identities that are capable of overcoming fragmentation through establishing agency and resisting patriarchal and Western forms of representation. One of the most important points that this study aimed to confirm through the analysis of Iraqi North American women's life narratives is that these women establish a sense of agency as unique individuals. Although the establishment of secure agency is debatable, in both Eastern and Western cultures, for Iraqi women in the diaspora the issue takes on another level of complication because in the diaspora they come to be identified as subalterns: as women and as immigrants.

The concept of agency is one of the most recurring issues that scholars and critics of Arab women's autobiography, like Fadia Faqir and Nawar Hassan Golley, focus on. Like these scholars, I feel that there seems to be a constant need to prove that these women are not only capable of writing and narrating, but also capable of presenting themselves as strong, individual female characters that contradict the image of Arab women in Western perception. The fact that they choose to narrate is in itself a form of agency for these women. Like Mehta, I believe that the act of narration

highlights an individual author's quest for identity and cultural authority amid political and social conflict to establish memory's enabling and disabling subjective presence in literary authorship. The fluid dynamism

of memory subverts ideological closure by providing each author with a creative outlet to contest the cultural normativity of tradition, while making her own mnemonic inscriptions on paper. (4)

In order to establish Iraqi North American women's ability to narrate their life stories as minority women to Western audiences and in turn be taken into consideration, there needs to be some proof of agency. Carolyn Steedman, in her essay "Enforced narratives: Stories of Another Self" (2000), writes that there are "two tacit assumptions" (25) concerning autobiography:

The first is that somehow, in some way, the production of written forms has something to do with the production of subjectivities; and the second is that this process is a voluntary one, that there is an *urge* to tell the self, that it comes from within, and that the impulsion to do so, in spoken or written language, is part of the very process of self construction. (25)

Steedman's argument supports my claim that, through their narratives, in this case written and oral, Iraqi North American women make the conscious choice to narrate the self into existence; thus they establish a sense of individuality and agency that allows them to carve a place within the North American literary scene.

Furthermore, the establishment of individuality is not negated by the relationality that is found in these texts; instead these women utilize their relationships with family members and friends to reinforce their sense of identity and defragment the loss that they suffered earlier in their lives. For example, the reconnection between Salbi and her mother Alia uncovers issues from the latter's past life in Iraq and the reasons behind the urgency of her exile from her home and country to the United States. Also the history of

her parents' relationship with Saddam Hussein and his interference in their lives is told retrospectively, thus allowing Salbi to piece together and fill in the sections of her life that were confusing in the past. She begins to understand her mother's actions and reassess her own life and her future choices. She is unable to change the past, but she gains a sense of freedom from the inhibitions and insecurities that bound her to it.

Like Salbi, the other narrators are unable to change their pasts, but at the same time, relational remembering enables them to understand their own identities more clearly. As seen in Mikhail's poetic memoir, her memories are highly connected to the people in her life, which are represented by the bags of photographs and letters. The photographs of the people she chooses to include in her bags, are also the stories of memories she chooses to recall; these are the people she became attached to, learned from, and admired. Even the difficult memories of loss and death help her shape her understanding of her position in her homeland and in the diaspora. Her relationship to them helped shape the person she becomes at the end of the memoir. The fragmented self that is seen throughout the first part of the work changes drastically in the second part as we see her more focused and more consistent flow of memories reflected in the more organized rhetoric and language of her poetry.

Finally for Nadir, relationality plays a major role in the construction of her Iraqi self, which was not accessible before her decision to connect or reconnect with family members and friends in Iraq. She is unable to visit her father's native country because of the dangers of war and its aftermath, but she becomes acquainted with aspects of the culture and history through the phone calls and emails with Karim, her uncle, distant cousins, and her photographer friend Farah Nosh. Nadir finds that even in the dire

situations of loss that her family endures, she is able to find a sense of belonging that she was incapable of feeling before. Also, it can be argued that the decision to reconnect with her Iraqi family and her Iraqi self is based on the outbreak of war in Iraq. Her relationship to her father's country and his people becomes a duty to understand her father's past life before it is all erased by the destruction of war and occupation.

Additionally, Iraqi North American narratives display different forms of resistance in the process of defragmenting their identities. The act of resistance shows that these women refuse to be limited by their own patriarchal societies or by the stereotypical representations of Arab women in North American societies and discourses. In addition to the sense of agency that these women portray through the act of narration, the fact that they do not accept to stay silent about the situation in their native country, nor do they fit neatly into pre-imaged notions of what Arab or Iraqi women should look and act like, strengthens the concept of agency in these women's writings. The life narratives that Mikhail and Salbi present are proof of this resistance. Like most world literature concerned with war and oppression, the perception of war is mainly masculine as "men were [viewed as] warriors, [while] women were watchers. Warriors talked about other warriors, women waited and listened" (Cooke "Arab Women" 14). Women in such societies are not expected to speak about the difficulties of war or protest against it. Thus, these women's choices to discuss issues like war, oppression, and even rape, as Arab women shows their rebellion against their native societies. However, they also condemn their host nations for their violence and oppression against Iraq, as seen in Mikhail, Salbi, and Nadir's narratives. They do not search for acceptance from either society, nor do they need it; by narrating their experiences they announce their independence from the

restraints of those societies.

Another form of resistance is portrayed through the experiences that these women narrate. For instance, in Valentine Balass's memoir she relates her refusal to send a man to negotiate her husband's release from prison; instead she decides to go alone, thus breaking the code of social conduct that was followed at the time. For Mikhail, her work itself places her in a precarious situation with Iraqi Intelligence as they question the hidden connotations in her poetry that refer to Saddam Hussein and his tyranny towards his own people. These women's actions, as well as their narratives, portray resistance on many levels. In Salbi's case, the text is filled with instances of rebellion and resistance, the most prominent being her being raped by her first husband, Fakhri. Her reaction to the incident shows her defiance of Arab women's social and marital conventions: first she takes action by breaking off the marriage immediately after the incident; she does not wait for her in-laws or her parents to interfere; she does not consider the effects that her actions will have on her reputation; and finally she writes about the incident, breaking the ultimate code of silence for women in her situation. Salbi's actions and her insistence on writing her experiences, feelings, and opinions sets her in opposition to her own people, even her family members. Abudi explains that the act of writing autobiography for Arab women in general is problematic: "Women writers, especially those who pen autobiographies, have to cope with opposition to their work within their families, cultures, and societies. They must avoid an overt discussion of religion, sex, and politics—the three taboos" (91). Salbi manages to include all three of these topics and in the end of her memoir she confronts her father about her decision to publicize these issues with or without his consent. Like the other narrators, she manages to take on a new

role that has not been ascribed to her by others.

These narratives portray Iraqi women who have ventured beyond the limitations of the roles and identities set for them by Eastern or Western discourses. They create a space in which their Iraqi selves and their North American selves exist and develop. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin assert, “hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen as the characteristic feature contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth” (137). Thus, these narrators not only defragment the loss and fragmentation that resulted from their traumatic experiences and displacement, they also establish selves that succeed by depicting modern, educated, and capable women. They break the stereotypical collective images of “the Iraqi or Arab woman” that is almost always portrayed in Western culture as oppressed, veiled, uneducated, and weak. Their narratives open the discussion of the situation in Iraq and raise questions concerning human rights, oppression, and displacement. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson add to this point of view by stating:

Narratives produced and circulating within the regime of human rights confront readers with emotional, even overwhelming, episodes of dehumanization, brutal and violent victimization, and exploitation. They call the reader to an ethical response through their affective appeals for recognition. Thus, while there can be many unpredictable responses to the publication, circulation, and reception of personal narrative of suffering and loss, scenes of witness are ones in which the narrator, the story, and

the listener/reader are entwined in an ethical call to empathetic

identification, recognition, and oftentimes action. ("The Trouble" 346)

Iraqi North American women's life narratives provide insight into the turmoil that has overcome the lives of Iraqis, both men and women, and while their contributions may not solve the problems that are taking place in Iraq, they allow us to understand the depth of the terror and loss that these people have experienced.

While I understand that these life narratives may never describe the whole picture of Iraqi women's struggles and traumas, at the same time, they open the doors for further research on the topic of Iraqi and Arab women's narratives. Some of the issues that this study did not focus on elaborately are parent-child relationships and how they shape the context of these narratives. Another possible issue to address within this frame is polyvocality and the issue of multiple voices that is present in all four works. While doing research for this study I found that there are a great number of critical works concerned with ethics and morality in life writing; these issues certainly need to be addressed with regards to Salbi's work and her representation of Saddam Hussein.

Finally, As an Iraqi woman, born and raised in Iraq, I found these women to be symbols of courage and pride because they discard their fear of society, of religious differences, and of language barriers without hesitation. As a Canadian immigrant, these works helped me reflect on my own journey from war-torn Iraq to Canada and enabled me to confront my own fears of the past while looking towards a more stable and more positive future.

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